

‘An excellent, accessible and highly lucid account of the vital role played by the Royal Navy in British success during the Seven Years War. It situates naval and maritime power firmly at the centre of British grand strategy in this, the first truly global conflict.’ – **Jeremy Black, Professor of History, University of Exeter**

‘The Seven Years War proved a major turning point in the Royal Navy’s rise to the dominant position it secured in the age of Nelson. The naval achievements in this long war are often overlooked because there was no single decisive battle at sea. Martin Robson fills this gap for the general reader by providing a clear picture of the scale and sweep of naval operations and the impact of naval power during the conflict. Drawing on recent work in this field and on his own incisive insights, Robson offers a highly readable and vigorous interpretation of the Royal Navy’s extraordinarily wide-ranging contribution to the war. The hazards of war, the challenges of command, and the effort required to stage joint operations are graphically described. He is very effective in linking naval activity of many different kinds to the larger question of what strategic objectives naval power served. Robson stresses the vital role played by the navy in enabling Britain to defeat the French in North America and India and establish itself as a truly global imperial power. By blending together the overall political purposes of deploying naval forces with vivid accounts of naval actions, Robson succeeds in introducing the reader to a dynamic, successful and probably decisive period of British naval history.’ – **Bruce Collins, Professor of Modern History, Sheffield Hallam University**

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Series Foreword

The Royal Navy has for centuries played a vital if sometimes misunderstood or even at times unsung part in Britain's history. Often it has been the principal – sometimes the only – means of defending British interests around the world. In peacetime the Royal Navy carries out a multitude of tasks as part of government policy – showing the flag, or naval diplomacy as it is now often called. In wartime, as the senior service of Britain's armed forces, the navy has taken the war to the enemy, by battle, by economic blockade or by attacking hostile territory from the sea. Adversaries have changed over the centuries. Old rivals have become today's alliance partners; the types of ship, the weapons within them and the technology – the 'how' of naval combat – have also changed. But fundamentally what the navy does has not changed. It exists to serve Britain's government and its people, to protect them and their interests wherever they might be threatened in the world.

This series, through the numerous individual books within it, throws new light on almost every aspect of Britain's Royal Navy: its ships, its people, the technology, the wars and peacetime operations too, from the birth of the modern navy following the restoration of Charles II to the throne in the late seventeenth century to the war on terror in the early twenty-first century.

The series consists of three chronologically themed books covering the sailing navy from the 1660s until 1815, the navy in the nineteenth century from the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and the navy since 1900. These are complemented by a number of slightly shorter books which examine the navy's part in particular wars, such as the Seven Years War, the American Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, World War II and the

Cold War, or particular aspects of the service: the navy and empire, the Women's Royal Naval Service, the Royal Marines, naval aviation and the submarine service. The books are standalone works in their own right, but when taken as a series present the most comprehensive and readable history of the Royal Navy.

Duncan Redford
National Museum of the Royal Navy

The role in Britain's history of the Royal Navy is all too easily and too often overlooked; this series will go a long way to redressing the balance. Anyone with an interest in British history in general or the Royal Navy in particular will find this series an invaluable and enjoyable resource.

Tim Benbow
Defence Studies Department,
King's College London at the
Defence Academy of the UK

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Jo Godfrey at I.B.Tauris has once again displayed superhuman patience and the confidence in my writing to wait for a full, completed manuscript rather than reading working drafts. Here the patience, advice and insightful comments of my series editor, Duncan Redford has been invaluable. Seventy thousand words is not much to cover the world's first truly global conflict and his steady hand on the tiller has helped me to separate the vital from the mere interesting. Of course, any errors that remain are my own.

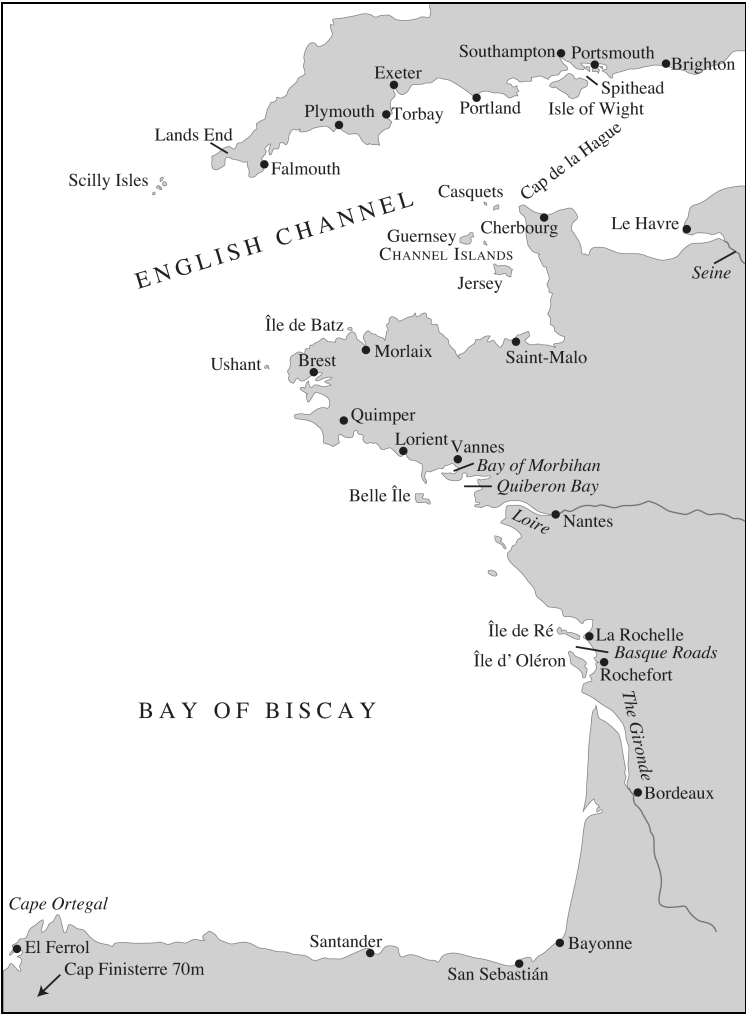
Today, when so much that the Royal Navy does happens out of sight of the general public, it is a hard task to convince people that navies matter. As a society we forget that states did, and still do, build navies to fight and, as Carl von Clausewitz reminds us, that is about violence, bloodshed and killing. We are, thankfully, a world away from the character of global conflict of two and a half centuries ago. Writing about such events can become all-consuming as one wrestles with problems with sources, interpretation, structure and even missing footnotes. Inevitably at such times Charlotte, Horatio and Lysander provide much welcome support, inspiration and perspective. This book is dedicated to them with much love and heartfelt thanks.



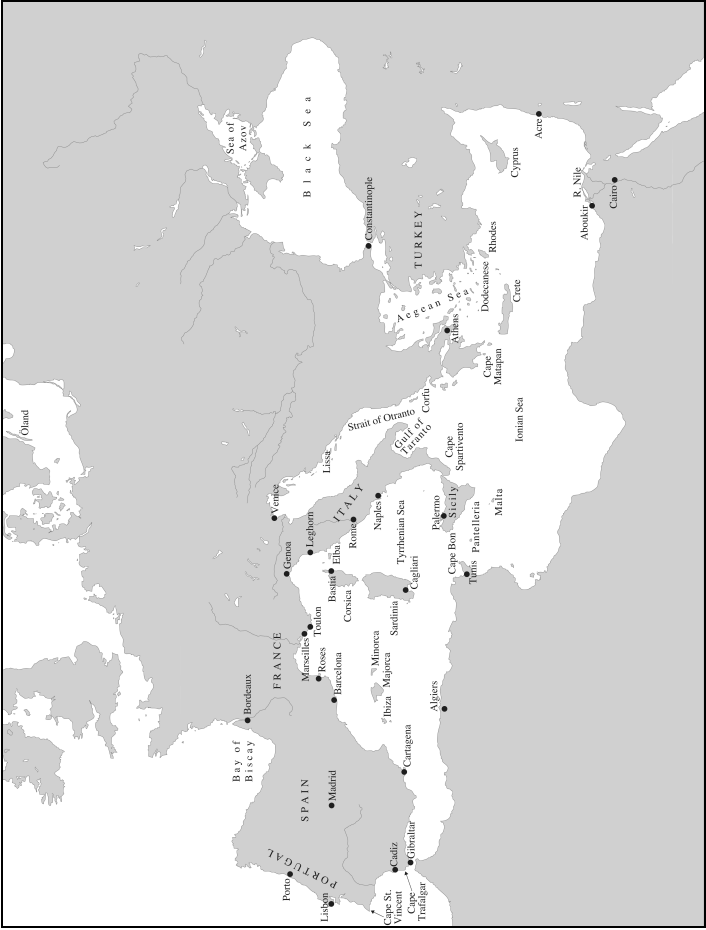
Map 1. North America and the North and South Atlantic



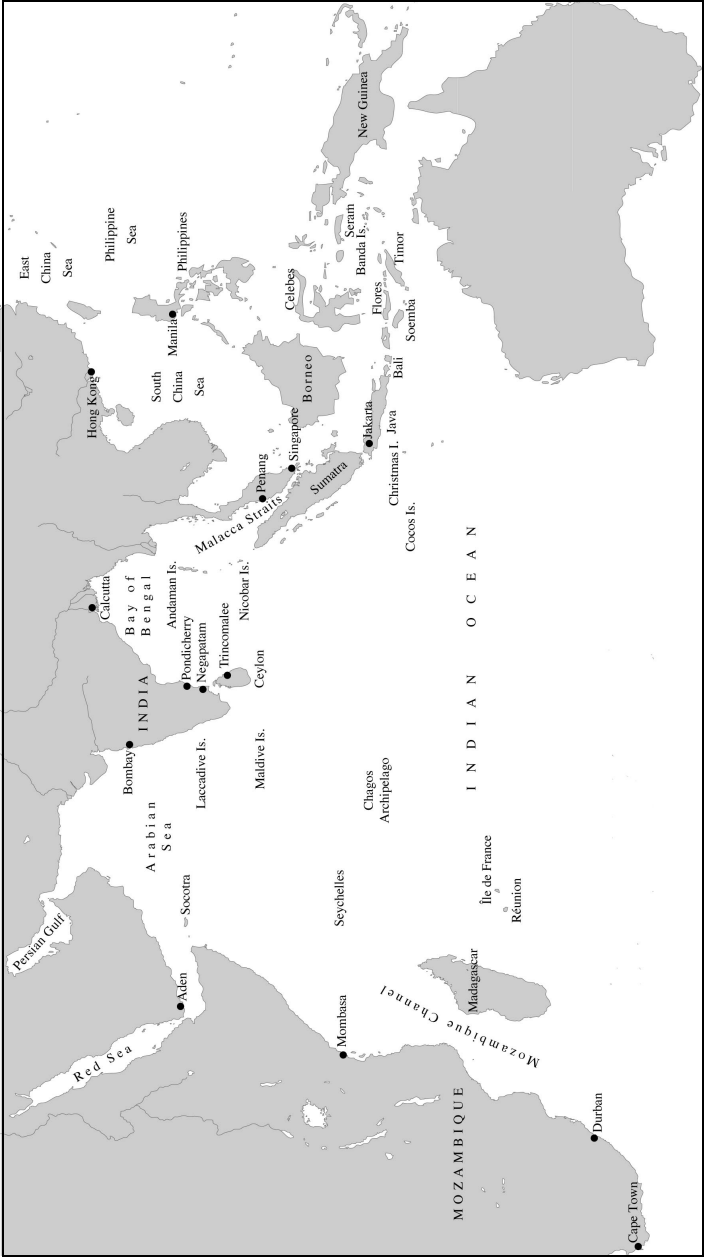
Map 2. The West Indies



Map 3. The English Channel and French Atlantic Coastline



Map 4. The Mediterranean



Map 5. The East Indies

INTRODUCTION

‘At 12 Mr Byng was shot’

At 07:00 on the morning of Monday 14 March 1757 a coffin was hoisted on board HMS *Monarch*. It was inscribed ‘The Hon. John Byng, Esqr. Died March 14th 1757’. The Honourable John Byng, Member of Parliament for Rochester and Vice Admiral in the Royal Navy was not dead, at least not yet. Later that morning Byng came on board the *Monarch*, wearing a light grey coat. Just before 12:00 he was on the quarterdeck. Byng threw his hat to the ground, knelt down on a cushion sodden from the rain and tied a white handkerchief over his eyes before dropping a second white handkerchief from his right hand. At this signal, a party of Royal Marines in their scarlet uniforms a mere six feet away unleashed a volley of lead into Admiral Byng. Even at such close range, one ball missed its target. *Monarch*’s log for that Monday states: ‘at 12 Mr Byng was shot dead by 6 Marines and put into his coffin.’¹

Byng had been sent to save the British garrison on Minorca from a French expedition but the entire effort to relieve Minorca was implemented in a hasty fashion. Byng’s ships were compromised by other operational pressures, for his expedition played second fiddle to the desire of the First Lord of the Admiralty, Admiral George Anson, to keep a strong force in home waters. Nevertheless, Byng had enough ships to make an impact and he engaged a French fleet, but the action was tactically mishandled. Byng then lost his nerve and retired to Gibraltar. That decision allowed the French fleet covering the invasion force to leave unmolested. As a direct result Minorca fell to the French.

The public had expected a more glorious outcome to the naval battle, and when his dispatches were published by the government they were carefully edited to lay the blame upon Byng. The result was a political

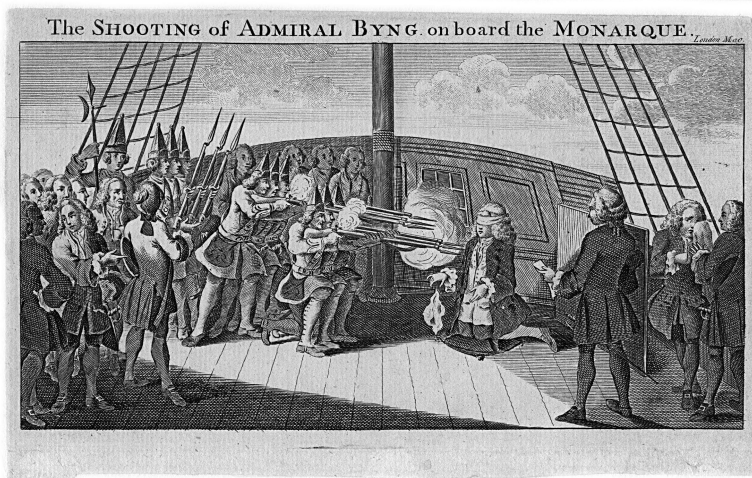


Fig. I.1. The execution of Admiral Byng, 14 March 1757

and public outcry. Byng was court martialled and although cleared of personal cowardice he was found guilty of 'failing to do his utmost' to engage the French. The mandatory sentence was death. With friends in high places Byng could expect some leniency, but fanned by the public, press and government the situation had developed a momentum of its own. Hung out to dry by the politicians and the subject of scorn from the general public, Byng met his fate with quiet dignity. 'It is thought good to kill an admiral from time to time to encourage the others' quipped Voltaire.²

Byng had certainly not been dealt the best hand, but his unwillingness to bring about a second fleet action was the reason he was found guilty. This is important. A contemporary of Byng's was Admiral Edward Boscawen who wryly wrote of Byng's failure at Minorca: 'I find courage of more worth than I thought it, but if a chief does not show example, the cause will hardly ever succeed'. A nation that was reliant upon a favourable position at sea for its economic well-being needed aggressive naval actions to negate the threat posed by enemy fleets. That required men who were up to the job, who displayed the moral courage to take aggressive action.³

The loss of Minorca and Byng's execution coincided with apparent naval ineptitude, for between 1755 and 1757 the war went badly for

Britain with much of the blame falling on the Royal Navy. In contrast, the French achieved much success, capturing Minorca and deterring a British attack on Louisbourg in 1757. Not only would French success at sea raise the perennial threat of an invasion of the British Isles, it would also hit Britain where it hurt most: in the pocket. The smooth running of the British Empire, British overseas commercial interests and the whole British war effort during the Seven Years War were dependent upon the success of the Royal Navy. But by the time Byng was executed on HMS *Monarch*, British success in the war seemed a very distant prospect. In order to understand why that came about it is important to assess what the Seven Years War was actually about for Britain and the Royal Navy.

From the Hugli river to the St Lawrence, from Manila to Havana, from the Coromandel Coast to Canada, for Britain the Seven Years War was fought on a global scale across four continents: North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. The war has often been labelled as the first global conflict, but this is only in part true. It was only the Anglo-French conflict (and from 1762 the Anglo-Spanish conflict) within the wider Seven Years War that was fought on a global scale. For the other key protagonists in Europe or for indigenous peoples in North America or India it was a more localised conflict. But, in that sense, it was a localised conflict which was enabled or influenced by the character of the wider Anglo-French war.

The European theatre, which witnessed some of history's famous battles such as Leuthen, Rossbach and Minden, often takes centre stage in assessing the conflict. Moreover, mention of the Seven Years War inevitably, and usually very quickly, leads to discussion of the campaigns of Frederick the Great and Prussia's existential struggle with Austria, Russia, France and Sweden which tends to dominate the historiography of the war. Even within this historiographical centre of gravity, the subsidiary operations of an army, British-funded and eventually containing British troops, in Germany under Ferdinand of Brunswick often seems far less important.

Yet for British statesman that was not the case – the operations of Ferdinand's army and support to Frederick were two parts of the same strand of British grand strategy to protect the electorate of Hanover from France. This was the prime British war object in Europe, for French possession of Hanover would entail the exchange of colonial territory to

obtain its freedom at a peace table, comprising Britain's wider global interests. In 1754–6 Britain was a country that was still very much 'European' in outlook. By 1763 that had changed, Britain was an 'imperial' power trying to balance European and colonial concerns. The war was, therefore, for Britain about 'the great contest for maritime empire' and it relied on the Royal Navy.⁴

In European and colonial theatres the key factor in the British approach to fighting the war, and hence Britain's wider imperial development, was the Royal Navy. Closely related to Britain's development as an imperial power are two further considerations. The first is to place the operations of the Royal Navy in their European and colonial contexts. But this is only part of the story, for while what the Royal Navy did is important, the crucial aspect is why that mattered. In other words, what role did the Royal Navy play in British success in the war? That entails an assessment far beyond a 'naval' context, involving British policy, diplomacy, economics and strategy as well as the operations of the British armed forces.

This final point is very important, for the three most famous 'British' battles of the Seven Years War, Plassey (1757), Minden and Quebec (in 1759 the *Annus Mirabilis* or Year of Victories), at first seem very much army-centric. Minden, fought by Ferdinand's army in Germany, appears the most landlocked, but as we shall see Ferdinand's operations were very much supported by the Royal Navy. The second, Plassey, gave the British control of Bengal and laid the foundations for the expansion of British India. In fact, the context of Robert Clive's battle was not only set by the Royal Navy, but his operations were dependent upon naval superiority. Finally we come to James Wolfe and Quebec, often seen as a victory for the British army led by Wolfe's inspirational leadership. The log of HMS *Lowestoft* for 13 September 1759 reads:

At 7.0 anchored in 9 fathoms low water [...] Landed all the troops on the north shore. At 10.0 our troops began a general action with the French [...] At 11.0 was brought on board the corpse of General Wolfe.

Lowestoft had anchored in the St Lawrence river, off Quebec, and recounts perhaps the most famous British action of the war: Wolfe's



Fig. I.2. The death of General Wolfe

audacious storming of the Plains of Abraham, the resultant battle and his death.⁵

The fact that Wolfe, perhaps the most famous British army officer of the war, was fighting and eventually dying in North America is not just evidence of the truly global nature of the Anglo-French conflict, but points to something more. Wolfe's army was able to capture Quebec due to the wider strategic situation shaped by British diplomacy and the Royal Navy, the operational effectiveness of Royal Navy fleets in securing and exploiting control of the sea, and the tactical skill and expertise of Royal Navy officers and sailors. The fates of Admiral Byng – executed by firing squad on his own quarterdeck – and General Wolfe stand in stark contrast to what many will think of the Seven Years War when set against what the great maritime historian and theorist Julian Corbett called 'the subordinate campaigns of Frederick the Great'.⁶

At sea there were relatively few 'classic' naval actions, the most famous being Quiberon Bay off the coast of France. Yet that does not mean that the Royal Navy did not contribute much towards eventual British success in the wars. It did, and in many ways that are less obvious than fleet battles and amphibious operations: protecting trade while attacking that

of the enemy, providing defence against invasion, blockading enemy warships and merchantmen. Moreover, the direct, operational and tactical integration of army and navy displayed at Quebec is far more typical of British operations during the war than the battles of Minden and Plassey. For the Seven Years War can be seen as a crucial step in the development of a distinctly British approach to conducting conflict, a 'British way in warfare' perhaps, of which the key element was the integration of army and navy in amphibious power projection. Here, both army and navy learned from failures by implementing a truly joint approach to operations, and which contrasts with the lack of coordination so evident in French operations. British strategy in the Seven Years War was inherently maritime based upon the Royal Navy. In fact, assessing the Royal Navy's contribution to British success is an incredibly valuable and important exercise as it goes beyond pure naval battles to provide a more nuanced understanding of the importance of maritime power to the British state.

British war aims

Tactics, operations and military strategies are just the ways employed to achieve political ends, so any talk of success in war must involve a method to judge that success. The issue here was that British war aims developed according to the context. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is that while an Anglo-French conflict had actually begun in the Ohio Valley, North America, in 1754–5, statesmen on both sides of the Channel were very keen to prevent it escalating to Europe. So the initial aim of both France and Britain was to determine, in their respective favour, territorial, trading and access rights (the last of these being particularly important with regard to the Newfoundland fisheries) in North America. For Britain that was a defined and limited war aim, defensive in appearance, based around a concept of 'security' but manifested in an aggressive manner, for British North America could never be safe with the French in possession of Canada. However, the policies and strategies employed to achieve this end contributed to the conflict spreading to a European tinderbox ready to be set alight. Moreover, British war aims in North America escalated into the larger

object of the conquest of Canada due to the wider context of the war and a degree of opportunism.

In Europe, for commercial and strategic reasons – particularly the danger of an invasion launched from the sheltered waters of the Scheldt estuary – British policy tended to concentrate on the security of the Low Countries (the Austrian Netherlands), but that region was consciously excluded from the conflict (a major strategic mistake by French policy makers). Instead, British concerns focused on King George II's electorate of Hanover. Hanover was important for domestic policy reasons, as British statesmen would have to ensure its protection for their sovereign, but also because its capture by the French would entail swapping some overseas colonial gain for its freedom during eventual peace talks. British strategy in Europe was, therefore, essentially defensive, defeating, or keeping bottled up in port, the French navy. Further overseas, in the West Indies, India and Africa, British policy was based around trade and access, but that often involved aggressive operations to take enemy territory and positions. This not only denied France overseas revenue and added that revenue to British coffers, but also provided useful bargaining counters which could be traded for the freedom of Hanover, if it came to that.

So for Britain at least the Seven Years War was fought on a global scale, and that inherently involved the ability to control and exploit sea access. While the sea can be a barrier it is also a highway, connecting different parts of the globe together into a maritime whole. That is how William Pitt viewed the war – as an exercise in global grand strategy. For Britain there were inherent linkages between all the theatres of operations, but despite that, British ministers did try to keep any conflict in North America separate from Europe. The problem was that their actions made the spread of conflict to Europe almost inevitable: it was impossible for them to separate the two even though their initial aims were to do exactly that. Given British global and European interests it is, therefore, impossible for the historian to separate the 'continental' from the wider Anglo-French imperial global conflict. Several British statesmen, and Pitt in particular, understood that fundamentally British war aims were very much maritime in their nature.⁷

So for Britain, the struggle was primarily with France (and then Spain from 1762), and was fought for colonial pre-eminence on a global scale.



Fig. 1.3. William Pitt, 1st Earl of Chatham (1708–78)

That required a careful balancing of grand strategy in order to achieve British aims in both Europe and overseas. It would be no use conquering North America to have to give it up to free Hanover. Realising that aggressively separating France from North America would ruin French trade, in Pitt's view British seapower and the Royal Navy were central to his strategic vision. He was not the only one. Just one year after the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle had brought the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–8) to a close, the Lord Chancellor, Lord Hardwicke, wrote to the Secretary of State, the Duke of Newcastle, noting that France had been keen for peace in 1748 to give sufficient opportunity for the French navy to recover. Hardwicke argued that no expense should be spared to increase the Royal Navy both in terms of ships and available seamen. This would act as a deterrent to possible French aggression in Europe, as France 'knows that her trade and colonies must always be in the power of



Fig. I.4. The Duke of Newcastle

the superior force at sea'.⁸ Newcastle pointed to the danger of a France freed from continental concerns, as in any future conflict with France the Royal Navy's supremacy at sea, which would be the defining factor in British strategy, would be inherently linked to a continental dimension of the conflict to keep France from devoting all her energies to a maritime war. Navies, as Newcastle intimated, do not operate in a strategic bubble. They have a purpose and that purpose is defined by political objects. Maritime war was (and is) more than just the operations of naval forces. Maritime war is about maritime trade, finance, shipping and insurance, in fact the mobilisation of a maritime fiscal economy. It is about more than just projecting power at sea; it is about projecting power *from the sea*. That is more than just amphibious operations; it is about influencing the course of conflict on land in the widest sense. Only with this wider strategic

vision can the role of the Royal Navy in British success in the Seven Years War be fully understood. But it is also necessary to identify British strategic priorities, and how they developed according to the wider context, and then how policy makers battled with often competing objects and ultimately assigned resources. In a maritime imperial context, the two main protagonists, Britain and France, were essentially competing for formal empire (the control of imperial possessions) and informal empire (control of markets and *entrepôts*). So, despite the conflict between Prussia on one side and Austria and Russia on the other, for Britain the Seven Years War was really about whether Britain or France (and from 1762 Spain) would be the pre-eminent global empire.⁹

It did not, however, start that way. In fact the first global war started with British attempts to ensure disagreements with France about territorial rights in the Ohio Valley did not escalate into a wider conflict. While this political and strategic aim was certainly noble, the problem was with the ways and means to achieve it.

CHAPTER 1

‘*Voilà*, the war begun’

The Countdown to War,
1754–6

The year 1756 is a very ‘European’ date for the start of the Seven Years War, for it ignores an ongoing situation between France and Britain in North America where blood had already been spilt. The continued problems in North America between Britain and France had their roots in the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle which had, supposedly, ended the War of the Austrian Succession in 1748. The treaty had settled nothing, and imperial competition and eventual conflict in North America was the result.

French possessions in North America were concentrated in the south around New Orleans, and the north-east around Montreal and Quebec. With British possessions along and inland from the Eastern Seaboard the potential for Anglo-French disputes to turn into conflict were therefore concentrated into three distinct areas around Nova Scotia, New York and the Ohio Valley, though it must be pointed out that the proximity of New Orleans to the British West Indies islands was also seen as a cause for concern.

With the Royal Navy’s presence at sea, the only way for France to link up her disparate possessions was via the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, then via Lakes Erie and Ontario. The journey between the Ohio and Lake Erie was overland and this area of territory, home to the Iroquois Confederation of Native Americans, was the direct cause of conflict erupting in North America between Britain and France. In Versailles,

French intentions were not necessarily to block westward expansion of the British colonies, but that is what was happening on the ground. It was certainly perceived that way in London. Initial skirmishes between the French and British colonial forces had seen the British rebuffed, and in 1754 the French completed Fort Duquesne where the Ohio forks into the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers (the former heading north towards Lake Erie).

The events of 1754 show that conflict could be a reality outside of formal declared war between European states. Eighteenth-century statesmen recognised the concept of 'reprisal' in the colonial sphere, tit-for-tat small wars fought by colonial forces over disputed territory. It did not always involve a state of war between European powers. The problem would arise when formal regular troops, either from colonial possessions or sent from Europe, tipped the balance one way or the other, usually leading to the other side sending out regular reinforcements, thereby creating a cycle of escalation. The other manner in which escalation could occur would be if recognised territorial possessions were attacked.

It is, therefore, important to point out that France and Britain were both transatlantic powers (albeit of different scale and importance) with interests in North America and Europe (and beyond for that matter). Three Navigation Acts in the 1650s and 1660s created a transatlantic 'maritime imperial system' for Britain based upon trade and shipping, and this generated wealth that allowed for the more effective management of public finance than her continental neighbours. By 1755 nearly half of all shipping sailing from English ports was long-distance oceanic, and this provided a pool of skilled seamen to man merchantmen in time of peace and warships in time of conflict. While Britain did have interests in Europe, separated from Continental Europe by the Channel and the Royal Navy, the foundation of her power was a clear head start in the transatlantic economy. On the other hand, while possessing North American colonies and a growing merchant marine, in 1754 France most certainly was still more a Continental European power. For Britain, any power fighting France in Europe would also distract French resources away from a maritime colonial conflict. So while it might be a neat historical division to treat the war for empire and the power struggle in

central Europe as separate entities, the reality was much more complex and challenging.¹

The British government was keen to respond to the setbacks of 1754, but without provoking escalation into a wider European war. The British domestic political scene was, however, entering a period of uncertainty which influenced policy and strategy. When Prime Minister Henry Pelham died on 6 March 1754 he was succeeded by his brother the Duke of Newcastle. The Newcastle administration would receive much criticism for its policies until replaced by the Pitt–Devonshire ministry on 16 November 1756. This arrangement lasted until May, when it in turn fell from office after the loss of Minorca and the execution of Admiral Byng. There followed a period where there was no effective government until the formation of the Pitt–Newcastle ministry of 25 June 1757. That lasted until the death of George II and the accession of his grandson, George III, which saw another change in the political make up with the rise of his favourite, the Earl of Bute.²

Upon coming to power in 1754 Newcastle's main foreign policy focus was North America and how to prevent conflict spreading to Europe. The recent past showed how difficult that might be. The War of the Austrian Succession, begun as a colonial conflict between Britain and Spain in 1739, served as a recent example of the near impossibility of preventing colonial conflict spreading to Europe. Moreover, the situation in Europe in 1754 was distinctly unfavourable for British interests. Although the Bourbon family compact, which tied together France and Spain, was waning a little due to the precarious state of Spanish finances, British aggression might lead to the implementation of a Franco-Spanish alliance. This would add Spanish colonial resources and, importantly, Spanish warships to the forces that France could assemble to take the war to Britain. It was important, therefore, for Britain not to be seen as an aggressor.³

Another issue was the relationship between Prussia and France. This was based around a military agreement of 1741 whereby France paid for 20,000 German troops to be at the disposal of Frederick of Prussia. In 1754 London did not know what Prussian intentions were, while talk of Germany raised the question of King George II's electorate of Hanover – a vexing security complication. Newcastle argued for the exertion of British influence through alliances to deter aggression and to preserve the peace;

the main object of Newcastle's 'system' was to prevent the invasion of Hanover, not by France but by the apparently aggressive and ambitious Frederick of Prussia. If Hanover fell into enemy hands, then its freedom would have to be secured by giving up colonial conquests or possessions, an option that might work with regards to France but not with Prussia. The danger posed by France or a French ally to Hanover was a contributory factor to the British wartime policy of seizing French overseas territory in case a territorial exchange was needed. So, as much as British politicians would like to limit war to North America in order to limit the threat to Hanover, if war with France did spread to Europe it would likely involve colonial and European operations.⁴

In that regard the prospects for keeping France occupied in Europe to give Britain a free hand overseas as exalted by Newcastle were not that good. Moreover, Hanover in the hands of the French had the potential to give the French navy access to the North Sea. This was important for the final area of concern to Newcastle: the Austrian-controlled Netherlands. The security of British colonies 'depended on the integrity of the Mother Country's naval position in the Narrow Seas'; French access to the North Sea, especially from both Antwerp and the Texel, would fundamentally undermine the cornerstone of British naval policy: stationing the Royal Navy's Western Squadron in the western approaches to the English Channel. For Britain, any price was worth paying to prevent Continental Europe's most powerful military power possessing deep water, accessible ports on the North Sea, as this threatened invasion. Preventing the French from obtaining access to the Low Countries, and the Scheldt estuary in particular, was the main British security concern in Europe. Versailles could assemble an army of over 300,000 men for military operations, way beyond the British ability to muster a mere 80,000 men. France also possessed the world's second largest navy and a growing economy.⁵

Set against such an unfavourable European situation, British diplomacy initially seemed successful. Discussions with smaller German states led to the hiring of mercenaries to provide an army to defend Hanover. Talks with Russia, where the Tsaritsa displayed a pathological hatred of Frederick, were designed to deter Prussia from attacking Hanover by prompting a Russian army to invade Prussia from the east. With somewhat cordial relations between London and Madrid, Spain seemed

determined on neutrality, which was good news for British ministers as Spanish belligerence would immediately alter the balance of naval forces. In June 1756 the French could muster 62 ships of the line and 38 frigates, compared to the Royal Navy's 89 ships of the line. The Spanish navy possessed 39 ships of the line, which could tip the balance of naval power. War with Spain would raise issues of Mediterranean security, in particular the safety of Gibraltar, as well as the security of Portugal and its excellent harbour at Lisbon; it would also raise the spectre of a joint invasion attempt of the British Isles. Overseas, a Franco-Spanish alliance might see the Royal Navy unable to guarantee the protection of West Indian islands and trade.⁶

That left Austria, which might yet be persuaded to stay out of an Anglo-French conflict. But Vienna was still seething at Frederick's seizure of Silesia in 1740, adding further potential for a European conflagration of exactly the type the Newcastle ministry desperately wished to avoid. Talks between London and Versailles to avoid conflict stalled; the latter wanted an armistice, the former a definite treaty on North American territory.

The Newcastle ministry, faced with the need to keep conflict in North America from spreading to Europe, were desperate to avoid the appearance of British aggression. But, while acting on the strategic defensive, in order to achieve the aim in North America some kind of operational and tactical offensive had to be implemented. In response to the setbacks in the Ohio Valley in September 1754, the Newcastle government decided to secretly reinforce North American garrisons. As Newcastle himself noted, if the French were not brought into line 'All North America will be lost'. With this decision '1754 must be considered the year in which the global Seven Years War between Britain and France began'.⁷

The reinforcement would consist of two British regular infantry regiments, the 44th and 48th Foot, under Major General Edward Braddock; this would show Versailles how serious the British were taking the French incursion. If the French backed down, all well and good, if not then there was nothing left but to forcibly remove the French from Fort Duquesne. In that case, wrote Newcastle, 'We then begin the war'. What was needed was a quick British victory to nip French ambitions in the bud and deter Versailles from further escalation.⁸

The initial object of the Braddock expedition was limited to the removal of the French from forts in the disputed Ohio territory. It was not an attack on recognised sovereign territory. But in a case of 'mission creep' it was expanded to include attacks on other French positions on Lake Ontario and in Nova Scotia. This was far too much for Braddock's force, so he was vested with the command of all British regular forces in North America. Wider aims gave greater prospect for escalation; even worse, secrecy was lost. The French knew something was afoot and would surely respond, creating an escalatory cycle of the kind the Braddock expedition was meant to forestall. Sailing from Cork on 16 January, still in time of peace, Braddock's force was escorted by the 50-gun ships *Centurion*, flying the flag of Commodore Augustus Keppel, and *Norwich*. Braddock arrived in Hampton Roads on 19 February 1755, with his troops following on 10 March.⁹

The problem with Newcastle's strategy was that it ignored the very linchpin of any strategy to isolate North America, or anywhere else overseas: the Royal Navy's Western Squadron. In time of peace, getting the Western Squadron to sea might deter Versailles. In war its task was not to blockade French ports in a strict sense, but rather to cruise off Ushant and keep a watch over the French Atlantic ports, in particular Brest. So placed, it would prevent any invasion attempt of the British Isles. It would also interdict French ships carrying reinforcements for North America, but that entailed intercepting them in European waters – precisely the kind of aggressive action that might add a European dimension to the conflict. The next-best option was to interdict French forces when they arrived in North American waters, as that would appear more akin to imperial defensive measures.

The need to do this became more acute when the French, fully aware of Braddock's reinforcements, decided to up the game. By April 1755 they had collected 14 ships of the line containing around 3,000 troops at Brest. On 10 April 1755 the British Cabinet, prompted by the French stance in ongoing negotiations and the obvious naval preparations at Brest, rubber-stamped the decision to send a squadron of seven ships of the line to be stationed off Louisbourg. It was contrary to the principle of concentrating force in home waters to protect British interests overseas, but uppermost in the minds of British ministers was the desire to keep any



Fig. 1.1. Admiral Edward Boscawen

conflict confined to North America. The Royal Navy officer tasked with the job was Admiral Edward Boscawen. His object was made patently clear:

If you fall in with any French ships of war or other vessels having on board troops or other warlike stores you will do your best to take possession of them. In case resistance should be made, you will employ the means at your disposal to capture and destroy them.

Following a further French claim to the entire extent of the disputed territory, the size of Boscawen's squadron was increased to 11 ships of the line and he sailed on 27 April 1755. It had, however, proved difficult to procure seamen for the fleet and many of his ships were undermanned while many of those sailors he did have were already suffering from sickness.¹⁰

The French expedition, now numbering 19 ships of the line and six frigates, sailed on 3 May under Admiral Emmanuel-Auguste de la Motte.

Although six of the French sail of the line were only to accompany the expedition 600 miles out into the Atlantic before turning back for Brest, the apparent scale of the French achievement prompted a swift response from Anson. On 11 May six sail of the line under Admiral Holburne were sent to reinforce Boscawen. This drew ships away from home waters at a time when Newcastle wanted the Western Squadron under Admiral Edward Hawke to cruise off Brest as a visible show of British naval strength. Preparing Hawke's fleet for sea was delayed by the desire to get Boscawen and Holburne to sea first; once that was completed Hawke could start manning and victualling his ships.

There was a dilemma, however, and it was best summed up by Newcastle. While tentative discussions to avoid conflict between London and Versailles dragged on, it would be very unseemly of Britain to act against the French fleet or French trade. It would seem duplicitous to all across Europe and might, Newcastle feared, bring Spain into any conflict in support of France. It mattered not if the war began in Europe or North America, but what was important was to prevent the French benefitting from any delay in hostilities. Instead, if Hawke's Western Squadron was used aggressively as a deterrent:

we should intercept all their trade, disable them, from being in a condition to make any considerable appearance at sea for some time, strike such a stroke at first upon their trade, that would make the whole Kingdom of France cry out against war, and by that means either prevent a war, or begin it with great advantage to ourselves.

If Hawke could get to sea he could start seizing French sailors, reducing the pool of experienced seamen available to the French navy. Newcastle got to the heart of the matter, for firm action would damage the French capacity to wage war and might even prevent it, but there was a risk that decisive action also might escalate the situation. Either way, delay would place France in a stronger position once her trade and sailors came in. Newcastle, Lord Chancellor Earl Hardwicke, Anson and other key figures met and discussed the matter. Opinion was split. Nevertheless, on 9 July the King assented to sending Hawke to sea with the Western Squadron.¹¹

Braddock and Boscawen

After gathering his troops Braddock headed for Fort Duquesne in the disputed Ohio Valley. His column was within ten miles of the object on 9 July 1755 when it was ambushed by a Franco-Indian force. The resulting Battle of the Monongahela was a complete disaster. Braddock's advance guard was driven back on to his main body. With unseen assailants peppering the British force with musket balls, targeting conspicuous officers in particular, the force inevitably lost cohesion. Braddock's force resisted for around three hours until he was mortally wounded. Word spread and men began to run for it. Retreat turned to blind panic as the redcoats expected a massacre. The survivors took a total of seven days to make it back to their starting point at Fort Cumberland.¹²

The old saying goes that worse things happen at sea. By the time of Braddock's defeat they already had. Boscawen arrived off Newfoundland on 3 June to find French ships already in the area. In foggy conditions off the Grand Banks on 10 June 1755, Captain Richard Howe in the 60-gun *Dunkirk* chased down and spoke to the captain of the French 64-gun *Alcide* who insisted that the two nations were still at peace. Hoisted on Boscawen's flagship the *Torbay* was, however, the signal to engage as the French ship would not shorten sail. Around midday Howe engaged the *Alcide*, and with Boscawen bearing down in the *Torbay* the Frenchman struck after an action lasting ten minutes. It was short, but bloody; *Dunkirk* losing nine men killed and 29 wounded to the fully armed *Alcide* whose losses were considerably higher, 54 men killed and 50 wounded. *Alcide* had been accompanied by the 64-gun *Lys*, armed *en flûte* (her heavier, lower deck guns had been left behind in Brest so she could accommodate troops). *Lys* ran for it but was captured after a two-hour chase by the *Defiance* and *Fougueux*. A third French ship, the fast-sailing *Dauphin Royal* escaped. The entire French fleet had, in fact, become scattered in the fog, which had probably saved them from a major action with Boscawen. By 13 June the remaining French ships carrying the reinforcements had made it to Louisbourg or had passed on to make passage for Quebec. Holburne arrived to join with Boscawen on 21 June.¹³

Boscawen's action is a classic example of a tactical success that is not translated into the desired strategic and political outcomes. By engaging



Fig. 1.2. The capture of the *Alcide* and *Lys*, 8 June 1755

the French ships but not dealing their fleet a crushing blow, Boscawen had failed to pre-empt French ambitions. The loss of 3,000 regular infantry and their escorting warships would have been a crushing blow to Versailles. It could not have failed to highlight the virtual impossibility of waging war in North America for an inferior naval power. Instead, the actions of the ministry and Boscawen threatened the very escalation that British ministers so wished to avoid. He had commenced the war at sea but had not done enough to force France into making concessions. In fact, France had, despite the losses, achieved the strategic object making it less likely Versailles would back down. When news of Boscawen's attack reached Versailles diplomatic relations were severed. Britain was clearly the aggressor; '*Voilà*, the war begun' Lord Chancellor Earl Hardwicke wryly observed.¹⁴

The British attempt to 'win' the war in North America had utterly failed. Boscawen had simply not been given enough ships to either intercept de la Motte on the way out or to lock him up in North America. A critical lack of frigates made it hard to find the French fleet in an area renowned for poor visibility. Only once Holburne's force arrived on 21 June did Boscawen have sufficient superiority to guarantee destroying the French, but by then it was too late. Boscawen had gone on to position

his fleet off the St Lawrence river, but his crews were sickly and he was barely able to maintain a blockade. Boscawen and Holburne would sail for England in October 1755 leaving a squadron to winter at Halifax under Commodore Richard Spry.¹⁵

French ire had been roused. With only 8,000 German mercenaries hired to defend Hanover, and France and Prussia in alliance, the European situation was unfavourable to say the least. It was perhaps with more than a little trepidation that British statesmen now viewed the impending conflict. Pitt was sounded out to join the ministry, making clear what he thought the object of the war should be: ‘the support of maritime and American war, in which we are going to be engaged, and the defence of the King’s German dominions.’ At the Admiralty Anson was expecting the French to launch a privateering campaign in the Channel and was desperate to get Hawke to sea.¹⁶

Stationing Boscawen in North America had been a somewhat necessary dispersal of Royal Navy force, but in trying to achieve a number of different objects the French had also dispersed their forces, with warships in North America and her Brest fleet split into three parts. While Boscawen had been busy in North American waters, in June Admiral Duguay had sailed from Brest with nine sail of the line to cover inbound French trade. Despite being ordered to limit his offensive activities he captured the 20-gun frigate HMS *Blandford* on 13 August. In London ministers knew the Brest fleet was out, apparently heading south, perhaps to Spain – heightening suspicions as to Spanish intentions. The question for ministers was, without formal war being declared, what to do next?

Escalation

Delays of a material nature, related to manning and victualling, and of a political nature, concerning a desire to avoid a confrontation with the French in home waters, had prevented Hawke from sailing. But with Duguay’s French fleet at sea something had to be done. Utilising Hawke’s fleet to shadow the Brest fleet was the obvious answer. Although Hawke’s first consideration was to protect British trade, ministers had learned from the Boscawen episode. Hawke was ordered not to engage single



Fig. 1.3. Lord Anson

French ships, frigates or merchantmen. Instead his object was to intercept 'the French squadron, or French men of war of the line of battle'. If an action occurred, this would guarantee that it would be a major naval battle with much prospect for defeating the French. If Hawke found the French committing any acts of hostility, Anson told him that 'you are then to commit all acts of hostility against the French, and endeavour to seize and take by every means their ships and vessels'. Flying his flag in the 90-gun *St George*, Hawke's Western Squadron sailed on 28 July with 16 ships of the line but only one frigate and a sloop. The lack of 'eyes for his fleet' would critically hamper his search for Duguay, as would the foul weather which delayed his arrival off Cape Finisterre until 23 August. He then retired to a point half way between there and Ushant.¹⁷

With events in North America and the taking of the *Blandford* further souring Anglo-French relations, on 23 August Hawke received orders to take any French warships, merchantmen and privateers he found. The order was widened on 27 August to include all Royal Navy commands; clearly Britain and France were now at war in all but name. This was a

crucial step in ministers' minds, for the best chance the Royal Navy had to Hoover up valuable French seamen was with the arrival in European waters of the incoming French trade from the West and East Indies. At sea, in the foul weather experienced during September, Duguay managed to avoid Hawke's fleet and slipped back into Brest. Hawke, his ships battered and his crews sickly, gave up his station in September, heading to Spithead. De la Motte, evading Boscawen's by now ineffective blockade of the St Lawrence, crossed the Atlantic and also made it into Brest shortly after Hawke had been forced off station. The French did hand back the *Blandford* in an attempt to calm matters down, but it was little more than a token gesture. During the course of the year the French had achieved tactical, operational and moral success, but they had not really changed the wider strategic picture – the French navy was still numerically inferior at sea.¹⁸

The Western Squadron was not ready to sail again until 14 October. With Hawke on a leave of absence, the Admiral in command during its second cruise of the year was John Byng. In awful weather and with crews becoming sickly and ships wearing out, Byng seized and detained over 300 French ships, including the 74-gun *Espérance* on 13 November, and captured 6,000 French seamen. Byng's unglamorous but important cruise would have long-term repercussions for French naval power.¹⁹

While the Newcastle ministry already viewed war as inevitable, Versailles had spent late 1755 caught in a strategic impasse, missing a glorious opportunity for aggressive action against British interests at sea. In North America events had gone rather well for the French, with the loss of Braddock's force and the resultant blow to British prestige among the Indian tribes. Their naval position in home waters had improved, with Duguay and de la Motte back in Brest. Not even the Royal Navy's actions in the autumn of 1755 brought forward a French declaration of war, even if by the end of 1755 Versailles viewed war as inevitable. While war had not been formally declared, in North America and at sea war was a reality.²⁰

British interests in Europe were looking increasingly exposed to French attack; lengthy talks with Austria and the Dutch yielded little progress with regard to the security of the Low Countries, and the safety of Hanover remained a problem. But, as at sea, no French attack came.

Once again, strategic paralysis struck Versailles at the very time the Low Countries were ripe for picking; they were probably more vulnerable in 1755 than at any other time between 1689 and 1815. While in financial terms the prospects of a successful war in 1755 were good, France was suffering from a combination of strategic pressures. Domestically the country was riven by internal problems between the church and its secular opponents, while Louis XV was very much under the influence of Madame de Pompadour. There was also a desire to get overseas trade in during the autumn to bolster the coffers. French diplomacy had failed to win over Spain; instead Madrid had been insulted by French machinations. Versailles was also caught in the very quandary facing British ministers, namely how to balance European and overseas interests. The question was how to use military might and a growing navy against British interests in North America and Hanover. French North American policy had been given added impetus by the Admiral the Comte de Galissonnière, who had argued that unless France acted Britain would obtain a lead over her that would never be closed. British control of North America would 'very certainly give them superiority in Europe'. France was allied with Prussia, though that agreement was scheduled to expire in May 1756. So while British ministers feared aggressive action might spark a European war, a French invasion of Hanover might also spark a wider European war, distracting Versailles from the ongoing hostilities with Britain. Finally, there were growing suspicions that Frederick might leave France in the lurch once he had achieved his objects in any conflict. To Frederick, France appeared a weak and indecisive ally.²¹

Britain had promised Russia £100,000 per year to keep 55,000 Russian troops on Frederick's eastern border. In time of war the terms would increase by a factor of five. That would, it was hoped, secure Hanover from the Prussian threat. The treaties were approved in December 1755. Frederick got wind of the discussions and, faced with the growing threat from Russia, with his only ally appearing spineless and less than friendly, acted with utter ruthlessness. He approached London for an alliance. Never mind offering not to attack Hanover, he offered to help defend it against aggression. At a stroke London's main object in Europe could be safeguarded and the resulting Treaty of Westminster was signed on 16 January 1756. In assuring that both countries would assist one another

to keep foreign forces off Hanoverian soil, it was a remarkable *volte-face* in Prussian and British policy.²²

In January 1756 the French sent an ultimatum to London, which seemed to be backed up by another round of naval preparations at Brest, intelligence of which arrived in London. On 27 February 1756 Hawke was ordered to sea to convoy three East India ships to westward of Ushant before taking up station in the western approaches. By 19 April Hawke was 15 leagues off Ushant but he was back in port by May for a period of rest, leaving Boscawen in command of the Western Squadron. Hawke had, however, not arrived home empty handed, for he had fallen in with a French convoy and taken eight valuable West Indiamen as prizes.²³

On 1 May 1756, in another remarkable diplomatic *volte-face*, France and Austria, perpetual enemies, signed a defensive alliance. On the surface the treaty seemed to provide France with a free hand to wage war against Britain without a continental entanglement. France would help Austria if she were attacked but Versailles, thinking war in Europe was unlikely, made a monumental strategic blunder promising not to invade the Low Countries. Moreover, Austria was not committed to helping France in her conflict with Britain, instead the focus for Vienna was clearly the danger posed by Frederick's Prussia and Austria's burning desire to recover Silesia.²⁴

So conflict between Britain and France which had started in the Ohio Valley had indeed escalated and transferred to Europe. On 18 May Britain declared war on France. Versailles now looked to deal Britain a heavy blow to disrupt her grand strategy, procure a bargaining counter and maybe even force London to peace negotiations. On 8 June Hawke's rest period ashore was interrupted by urgent orders to respond to a crisis in the Mediterranean and the controversial actions of Admiral John Byng.²⁵

CHAPTER 2

‘What a scandal to the Navy’

The Mediterranean, 1756–8

To shock London into making an early peace, France had two options. The first was the perennial threat of invading the British Isles (including Ireland). The second was to take advantage of dispersed Royal Navy deployments, seize local command of the sea and use it to achieve a startling success. Both were dependent upon the French navy.

After 1748 the French navy had embarked on a building programme, and by the end of 1755 possessed 57 ships of the line and 31 frigates, with a further seven sail of the line and six frigates to be launched in 1756. The majority were based in the Atlantic ports to maintain communications with North America and threaten an invasion of the British Isles. This effort had, however, exhausted domestic and imported naval supplies, and with the Royal Navy’s desire to stop French trade, building more or maintaining those ships it had built was unsustainable. As a result, the French tended to avoid battle to preserve their fleet ‘in being’, and the French navy was a factor in the war until 1759. Madrid had also been making good the losses of the 1739–48 war, launching 38 new ships of the line by 1756. With her colonial resources and bases Spain posed more of a threat in the Caribbean than France. By 1755 in tonnage terms the Bourbon powers of France (162,000 tons) and Spain (113,000) had achieved parity with the Royal Navy (277,000).¹

The fundamental problem for the French remained finding sufficient experienced sailors to man their ships. The loss of 6,000 experienced seamen in 1755 before war had been officially declared delayed the mobilisation of French naval power; only 28 sail of the line were ready for

sea by 1 June 1756. Further losses in 1756 and 1757 would see the French lose between 10,000 and 12,000 men from a pool of around 60,000: France did not have the sailors for a long maritime war. Unable to mount a sustained challenge to the Royal Navy, many French seamen decided to join privateers, again reducing the available manpower pool for the navy.²

The Mediterranean, 1756–8

Nevertheless, between 1756 and 1758 the French put their navy to good use. Faced with obvious French naval preparations in early 1756, the question facing ministers in London was what were the French up to? In December 1755 Anson had thought French preparations at Toulon would be directed against the British Isles. Further weight was given to this in early 1756 when Newcastle received intelligence that preparations were taking place for an invasion, but the French were assembling naval forces in Toulon which raised a number of potential targets from the West Indies to the British Isles to the Mediterranean.

Desperate to avoid a continental conflagration but unable to challenge British seapower, France used her navy not to fight the Royal Navy but to achieve specific mission-oriented objects. In January 1756 two squadrons went to the West Indies to escort the valuable trade back to France, and one of these succeeded in taking the 64-gun HMS *Warwick*. In early April another squadron sailed, carrying troops to help bolster Canadian defences. Sending squadrons across the Atlantic was a risky but necessary part of French plans for a defensive war.³

With France also moving troops towards the Atlantic ports, such naval activity heightened British uncertainty. One thing that was obvious was the French naval preparations in Toulon. By 4 April nearly 15,000 French troops under the Duc de Richelieu were ready to embark upon 173 transports escorted by 12 ships of the line. With their sailing delayed by a storm, on 17 April the French expedition dropped anchor off the Mediterranean island of Minorca (taken by Britain from Spain in 1708). Four days later the French troops were ashore.⁴

With the danger of a French invasion of the British Isles and a focus on the conflict in North America, British Ministers had been caught flatfooted by the speed and purpose of the French expedition. Anson had decided

that the Western Squadron took priority over any reinforcements to the Mediterranean, where Commodore George Edgcumbe's squadron was still at peacetime levels, consisting of the 58-gun *Princess Louisa* and the 50-gun ships *Deptford* and *Portland* plus four frigates: the 20-gun *Phoenix*, *Experiment* and *Dolphin* and the 14-gun *Fortune*. His three ships of the line were stationed at Minorca when the French expedition arrived and they wisely fled to Gibraltar to raise the alarm.⁵

Minorca was important for the Royal Navy to project power into the Mediterranean. Its particular value was the close proximity of the excellent harbour at Port Mahon to the French fleet base at Toulon, some 180 miles to the north. Along with Gibraltar, Minorca provided a frontline of defence against any French moves to use their Toulon fleet to leave the Mediterranean and either sail for North America or the Caribbean, or to head into the Channel. Minorca did, however, require a permanent garrison and secure maritime communications for it imported much of its food. Alongside its strategic value to Britain, if the French captured Minorca it could be used to offset British colonial success in future peace talks. Finally, coming on the back of events in North America, the loss of Minorca would have serious domestic repercussions for the Newcastle administration. Minorca must be saved.

The key position in the defence of Minorca was St Philip's Castle; sited high on rocky ground, it commanded Port Mahon and the anchorage. The island's garrison was understrength, mustering 2,860 men, and suffered from a lack of senior officers. Four regimental colonels, the commandant of the Port Mahon fortress, the general in charge and even the governor were all on leave in England and would have to sail with a relief force. Command of the defenders lay with the formidable 84-year-old Major General William Blakeney. Despite all this, taking St Philip by regular siege methods would be tricky and lengthy, many in the French expedition predicted failure. Having escorted the expedition to Minorca, Admiral Galissonnière's role was now to save his ships by heading back to Toulon if the Royal Navy appeared in strength. That became a reality on 18 May when 13 ships appeared on the horizon.⁶

In February the British had received intelligence reports that the French preparations at Toulon might be directed against Minorca, and this was corroborated in early March as reports reached London from Madrid. It

was believed France would take the island and offer it to Spain in order to draw that country into the war against Britain. With Minorca threatened, swift and decisive action was needed to drive off the French fleet, isolate the French army on Minorca and bolster the British garrison. The Admiralty had concluded as early as 9 March that 'as strong a squadron as can be spared from hence should be got ready to send into the Mediterranean'. Anson allocated ten ships of the line to be commanded by Admiral John Byng to be made ready to sail to Minorca. Although Byng was delayed by attempting to find sufficient sailors to man his ships, by the time he sailed from Portsmouth on 6 April his fleet was sufficiently manned. After battling contrary winds, Byng arrived off Gibraltar on 2 May.⁷

Initially Byng was outnumbered by the French, for he would be taking his ten sail of the line into action with 12 enemy fully equipped with their heavier guns. When intelligence arrived stating the French force was larger than originally thought, Anson did not send additional ships to Byng. Moreover, the possibility that the Western Squadron, now under Boscawen, could reinforce Byng was not considered by Anson. Instructed by the government to reinforce Byng, Anson dispatched four ships from Portsmouth, delaying their arrival in theatre. Uppermost in the mind of Anson was the need to keep the Western Squadron strong, even if that strategy compromised other interests. While Anson was probably right in naval and strategic terms, what was at stake was the loss of Minorca – and in the climate of 1756 that was more of a political problem than a strategic one. Yet this does ignore one further factor, for at Gibraltar Byng found Edgcumbe's force, minus a frigate, which he took under his command. This gave him 13 ships of the line and four frigates to take on 12 French ships of the line and four frigates. Moreover, while many of his ships were certainly not brand new, neither were they old and worn out. Simply put, the resources assigned to Byng by Anson, who had many other strategic concerns to balance, were enough to secure the object to which he had been assigned.⁸

One cannot help but feel that Byng thought he was being sent on a fool's errand. His orders made no mention of bringing the enemy fleet to decisive action: 'If you find any attack made upon that island [Minorca] by the French, you are to use all possible means in your power for its relief.' If they were not there he was to blockade Toulon, but his overriding



Fig. 2.1. Admiral Byng

object was to safeguard Minorca and Gibraltar ‘from any hostile attempt’. This might seem a set of confused orders, but in an age of slow communications it was normal for the Admiralty to provide broad guidance to officers sailing overseas. Micro-management from London was impossible. So while Byng’s object was clear – to prevent the French taking Minorca – the ways and means for achieving this were not made clear. He seems to have prepared himself for a simple task of landing reinforcements before cruising off Toulon. Aware that the French had indeed landed, he would have to fight an aggressive naval battle. Despite his success in taking French ships in 1755, Byng was an unimaginative officer who needed specific instructions to stir him into aggressive action. Anson and the Admiralty did not provide this. Nevertheless, in the hands of an aggressive and capable officer, the force sent should have been enough to frustrate French plans.⁹

Byng’s pessimism and unwillingness to take the initiative became increasingly evident when he arrived at Gibraltar and failed to implement orders to take with him 700 men drawn from the garrison. Instead, the

views of Lieutenant General Fowke, who argued that St Philip's was doomed, seemed to reinforce Byng's own belief that Minorca was all but lost and that Gibraltar might be next. This defeatist tone infused his correspondence with the Admiralty. Byng's dispatch of 4 May explaining his conduct at Gibraltar led George II to declare 'This man will not fight'. The fate of Minorca now lay in the hands of Byng.¹⁰

Battle of Minorca, 20 May 1756

Nearing Minorca on 19 May, Byng sent a frigate ahead of his main fleet to converse with the garrison but it was driven off by the French. Both sides prepared for action but the wind was very light. Next morning, as the fog lifted around 09:00, Byng found himself 12 miles off the French fleet to the south-east. Forming a line of battle, Byng's fleet was divided into two divisions: seven ships in the van under his personal control and six ships in the rear under Admiral Temple-West, giving his fleet 13 ships of the line. Galissonière's 12 ships were organised into three divisions, with the commander in the centre.

The two fleets closed with each other, both desperate to obtain the weather gauge until at around 12:30 the wind direction changed, throwing the French into some confusion and giving Byng his chance. He failed to take advantage and the fleets continued to close at an acute angle. Byng's intent was not to bear down on the French fleet and subject his ships to raking fire until the two fleets were very close. His original plan had designated the rearmost ship of his line, *Defiance*, to lead the attack, but there were clearly problems with communication. Byng's flagship, the 90-gun *Ramillies*, made frantic signals but the *Defiance* failed to respond to his orders. The attack was turning into a shambles and Byng's fleeting opportunity was passing. At around 14:30 he finally took the initiative, ordering Temple-West's division, now in the van, 'to engage to bring on the action, and to empower those ships to fire respectively as they got within proper distance'.¹¹

Temple-West's division immediately bore down on their respective enemies and a close range gunnery duel commenced. Temple-West's 68-gun *Buckingham* drove her opponent off within half an hour, and within another hour the French van had been driven to leeward. Byng's division

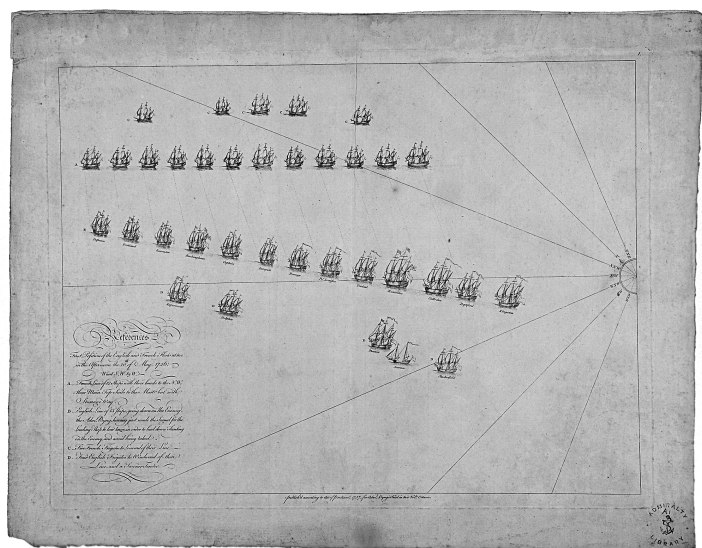


Fig. 2.2. The Battle of Minorca: Byng's Fleet, led by the *Defiance*, closing with the French (at the top of the plan)

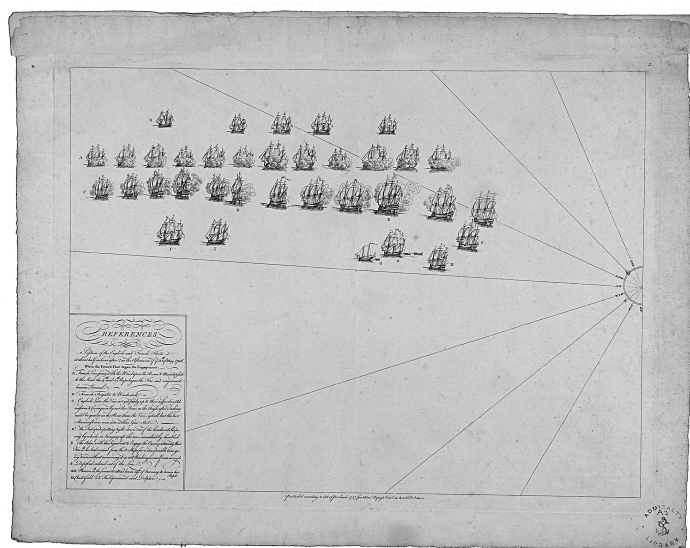


Fig. 2.3. About 14:30 and the van of the British fleet has failed to close with the French

was, however, lagging behind, sticking to his original plan. His ability to exert command and control over the battle was hampered by his distance from the action, around two miles. As he finally started to close his division nearly ran foul of the much-damaged *Intrepid* from Temple-West's division. This further slowed Byng's advance and although *Ramillies*, the most powerful ship present, opened fire at around 15:00 she did not come within effective range for a further two hours. As a consequence not only had Byng failed to bring his division into action to support Temple-West, he had also wasted his best resource. Even worse, a dangerous gap had opened up between the two British divisions.¹²

Galissonière had the intellect to act upon such a glorious opportunity and a coherent body of ships under his direct command with which to take advantage of poor British fleet management. Galissonière signalled his centre and rear to cut the British line and fall on the unengaged side of Temple-West's division, thereby defeating the British van in detail. The plan was noble and bold, but the timing was off for the opportunity had in fact already passed. Byng managed to finally shake out his division and intercept Galissonière, who wore off to leeward. It was about 17:30 and the action petered out. Byng later stated that, given the damage to his ships, he felt it unwise to renew the action; he felt his priority was to maintain his fleet in being rather than to make further efforts to destroy the French. He was convinced there was 'no further possibility of bringing the enemy to action again, as they declined it, without I had a sufficient force and superiority to enable me to make the general signal to chase'.¹³

So far there had been nothing too much out of the ordinary for a fleet battle in the age of sail. Command and control problems were ever-present, the wind and weather liable to change and plans thrown into confusion by unexpected events – they had all contributed to what was a tactically indecisive action. Losses in the British fleet were 43 killed and 168 wounded; the French had lost 38 killed and 175 wounded. Some indication of the nature of the fighting can be gleaned from the fact that the majority of the British casualties were in the van – the last five ships of Byng's fleet, including his powerful *Ramillies*, suffered no casualties at all.¹⁴

It was the decision making that followed which turned the battle of Minorca into a British disaster. For the next four days, while Byng's fleet

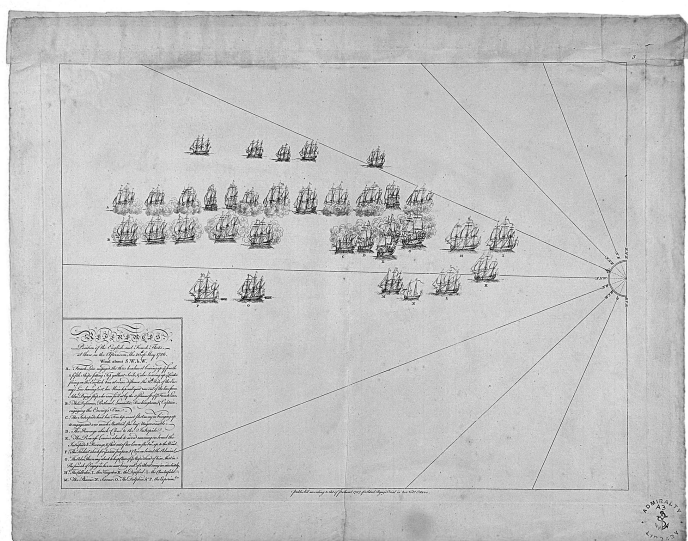


Fig. 2.4. About 15:00 and Byng's fleet has divided in two

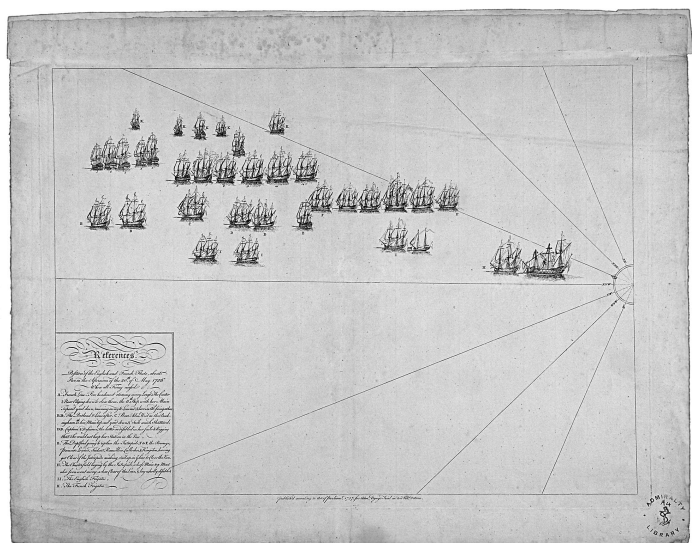


Fig. 2.5. The fleets about 17:00. Byng's fleet had fought off Galissonière's counter attack

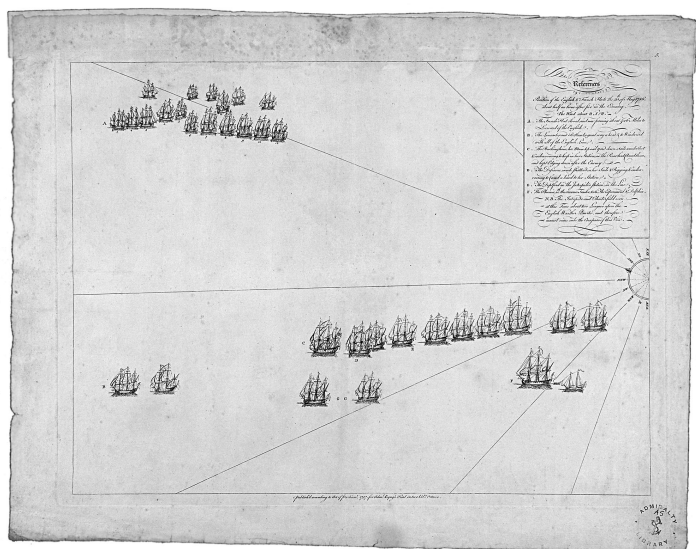


Fig. 2.6. The fleets have separated and Byng starts his controversial decision making process

made running repairs, there was no contact between his fleet and the garrison. On 24 May Byng called a council of war. The questions were heavily loaded by Byng's pessimism, and the council resolved on a course of action the Admiral was already convinced of: to retreat to Gibraltar to continue repairs and thereby preserve the fleet. It was a shockingly inept decision. All Byng had to do was maintain his fleet in theatre, thereby posing a constant danger not just to Galissonière but also to his communications with Richelieu's army ashore until reinforcements arrived. That would tip the balance decisively in Byng's favour and allow him to destroy or at least drive off Galissonière's fleet. Instead Byng considered Minorca as lost. Byng's fleet arrived at Gibraltar on 19 June where he found four ships of the line and a further 50-gun ship needed to deal with Galissonière. After taking on water Byng lingered, seemingly unwilling to take further offensive action.¹⁵

On 3 July Hawke arrived. His orders were a model of clarity. First, he was to replace Byng and take all the ships under his command. Second, Hawke was to inquire into the conduct of the captains that had served under Byng and if he found any who had not 'acted with due spirit and

vigour' he was to send them home. The next part of his orders was dependent upon the situation in Minorca. If St Philip still held out, he was to waste no time in sailing for the island and do whatever was needed to secure its relief. If St Philip had fallen, Hawke was to 'endeavour by all means to destroy the French fleet in the Mediterranean'. In the meantime he was to use cruisers to isolate the French garrison on the island and generally 'to employ the utmost vigilance and vigour to annoy and distress the enemy everywhere within the extent of your command and by every method and means in your power'. The orders were unequivocal; the Admiralty would not countenance a repeat of Byng's timidity in the face of the enemy. Hawke sailed for Minorca, and on 15 July fell in with a number of French transports carrying the Minorca garrison to Gibraltar – clearly the island had fallen. Hawke arrived off the island on 20 July but Galissonière had already fled for Toulon.¹⁶

On Minorca the defenders of St Philip, under the tenacious Blakeney, had continued to hold out despite being abandoned by Byng. Many in Richelieu's force became ever more despondent, and fire from the besieging forces could only be maintained when a supply of shot and powder arrived on 22 June. If Byng had maintained his fleet in theatre this shipment, along with others, could have been intercepted, forcing the French to abandon the siege. Thinking that the Royal Navy would inevitably return and cut his communications with the fleet, Richelieu resolved to bring matters to a head and storm the fortress on 27 June. Despite making some inroads, the attack was a failure and Richelieu, desperate to take St Philip, offered extremely generous terms. In the face of French attacks, lacking officers to lead the men and seemingly abandoned to their fate by the Royal Navy, Blakeney accepted. On 28 June Minorca surrendered.¹⁷

With Spain determined to remain neutral, despite the French offer of Minorca, the loss of the island was not a major strategic blow for the British war effort. Anson's concentration on the Western Squadron was therefore, in naval and strategic terms, the correct decision. The British war effort could cope with the loss of Minorca, but a French invasion attempt of the British Isles or moves to reinforce the key theatre of North America were a different matter. The problem for Anson's thinking was that military action does not operate in a vacuum: it is there

to serve policy, and policy is made by politicians. Here the loss of Minorca had major repercussions, not just for Byng but for the British government.

Byng was placed under arrest shortly after he arrived at Portsmouth on 26 July, in part to protect him from the anger of the general public who blamed him and the administration for the loss of Minorca. The administration was more than happy for Byng to be blamed. His dispatch, dated 25 May 1756, was published in the *London Gazette* in a heavily edited form and gave the impression that Byng had run away from the French. The process dragged on until a court martial could be convened on 28 December 1756. It lasted for four weeks. Acquitted of personal cowardice, Byng was found guilty of not supporting his ships already engaged, which contravened the 12th Article of War and carried the death penalty. The court asked for leniency but the Admiralty refused and the death sentence was passed.¹⁸

The Admiralty sent notice of the sentence to the King, who was advised it was not illegal. With Byng also a Member of Parliament the furore was inherently political in nature. Parliament was against the penalty but the House of Lords rejected a bill that would have allowed the members of the court martial to speak openly about their findings. In a growing political storm, on 14 March 1757 Byng was executed. He was not greatly mourned; indecisive and pessimistic, his tactical and operational culpability was writ large as was his failure to grasp the strategic outcome of his inability to deal with Galissonnière. When news had arrived in England in 1756, the Whig politician and pamphleteer, the Earl of Bath fumed 'all the world is calling our admirals rascals and cowards'. Admiral Boscawen summed it all up: 'What a scandal to the Navy that there should be premeditated cowards that have been so long bred to arms. I should think for the future that no man should command that had not given proof of his courage.'¹⁹

Byng's conduct made him an easy scapegoat, but his fears over the condition of his ships and the problems in manning them must be seen in a wider context as they were part of a chronic problem facing the Royal Navy in 1756. On paper, in January 1756 the Royal Navy had 168 ships in commission. But due to new ships needing crews and ships requiring repairs, refits or cleaning, of the 71 ships in home ports, the

Admiralty estimated that only 13 could be made ready for active service. In all the navy was 13,641 men short of the number it needed. At Portsmouth not only was Byng 899 men short of his requirements, of those already on the books 740 men were not present. In addition, hampering the manning of his ships was Anson's focus on home defence rather than overseas service, and his ordering Byng to ready four ships of the line and a couple of frigates for the Channel before manning his ships to sail to Minorca. Byng did bring his ships up to complement by the time he sailed from England, but he would later state they were the worst manned in the Royal Navy, and this was crucial in his reasoning not to re-engage the French at Minorca. His complaint was about the quality, or lack of it, of the seamen, rather than the numbers.²⁰

In the political arena, the fallout from the loss of Minorca was the catalyst for the demise of the Newcastle ministry, with Newcastle, Anson and Hardwicke all resigning. The resulting political inertia inhibited the British war effort until Newcastle and Pitt returned to office in June 1757 with a ministry that would shape British grand strategy.



Fig. 2.7. The English Lion Dismember'd or the voice of the public for an enquiry into the loss of Minorca with Adl. B-g's plea before his Examiners

Commerce war in the Mediterranean

While the loss of Minorca had serious repercussions for Byng and the government, rather than opening a Mediterranean theatre to the conflict it signalled an end to major offensive operations. The French had preserved their Toulon fleet and might use it elsewhere to good effect, but instead they demobilised and for the rest of 1756 and 1757 it remained in port. The Royal Navy, operating out of Gibraltar, could keep a careful watch over the entrance and exit of the Mediterranean. It might seem, therefore, that the Mediterranean was a relatively peaceful theatre. This is not the case, for there was an ongoing small war – a war of commerce protection and commerce raiding.

With the French unwilling to come out of Toulon to engage his fleet, Hawke resolved to free the *St George*, a British privateer that had been detained in Leghorn. Hawke detached the 60-gun *Jersey* and 50-gun *Iris* to escort British merchant ships out of the port. Captain William Burnaby of the *Jersey* informed the port authorities that he was authorised to use force to ward off any attempt to prevent the merchant ships and the *St George* sailing; all were successfully escorted out. Less successful was an attempt by Hawke to free a British merchantman, captured by a French privateer and now held at Algeciras under protection from Spanish batteries. The Spanish, supposedly neutral, rejected a call to force the privateer and her prize out of the port. When British boats attempted to retrieve the merchant ship the combined fire of the privateer and the Spaniards inflicted 150 casualties on the attacking force, but the ship was retaken. In August Hawke had detached the *Iris* to cruise off Benidorm. She came across a ship flying English colours and, suspicious, fired upon her. At this point French colours were hoisted and she struck and was briefly taken. Hawke, keen not to push things too far with Madrid, ordered the ship to be left 'to avoid giving offence to the Spanish court'.²¹

In April 1757, while awaiting the return of his new sloop the *Fortune*, the enterprising William Hotham decided upon a cruise in the *Syren*, a sixth rate of 20 guns. He attacked and drove off the larger 26-gun *Télémaque*. Then taking over command of the *Fortune*, during convoy escort duty he closed with and boarded a French privateer. The following

year the *Hampton Court* attacked the 36-gun *Nymphei*, driving her ashore on the Majorcan coastline. This ‘small war’ continued until 1758 when the Mediterranean again became a focus for fleet action.²²

Battle of Cartagena, 28 February 1758

The lull in fleet activity had not been for want of trying. In late March 1757 Rear Admiral Charles Saunders, who had by now replaced Hawke in command of the Mediterranean squadron, heard that French ships were finally at sea. This was a small squadron of four ships of the line and a frigate, which were ultimately destined for Louisbourg. On 2 April Saunders sailed from Gibraltar with the 74-gun *Culloden*, 64-gun *Berwick*, 60-gun *Princess Louisa*, and the 50-gun ships *Guernsey* and *Portland*. Three days later, in the early evening, Saunders found his prey, and although brought to engagement range, during the night the French slipped away. In May Vice Admiral Henry Osborn, bringing out reinforcements, assumed command.²³

Osborn’s squadron would play an important role in a wider strategy, which included naval activity by the Western Squadron in the Channel and naval operations in North America, to prevent the French Mediterranean fleet from reinforcing their position in Louisbourg. While deploying to fulfil this primary task Osborn had an important job to protect British trade from French warships and privateers and to take the war to the enemy, destroying their seaborne trade and raiding coastal areas. In this latter role, the coastline of Provence was attacked, disrupting French preparations at Toulon. This was important, for the French were about to send their Toulon fleet to sea and, they hoped, evade Osborn before heading across the Atlantic.

Admiral de la Clue could only muster enough sailors to man six ships of the line when he weighed anchor at Toulon on 8 November 1757. With the onset of the bad winter weather, Osborn had already fallen back upon Gibraltar. When de la Clue found his route out of the Mediterranean blocked he ran for Cartagena. With Spain neutral, Osborn was unable to implement a rigorous blockade and instead, using the facilities at Gibraltar for repair and victuals, deployed his frigates to keep a careful watch over de la Clue while stationing his ships of the line either at Gibraltar or out to

sea. This provided much scope for de la Clue to be tempted out and hopefully destroyed at sea.²⁴

The relief of Louisbourg was the prime French aim for 1758 and, bottled up in Cartagena, de la Clue served no strategic purpose. Admiral Duquesne was sent with five ships of the line to join with de la Clue, allowing the French fleet to force its way past Osborn and head across the Atlantic. Facing the possibility of an enemy fleet concentration but lacking sufficient force to watch the Straits of Gibraltar and Cartagena, Osborn, hearing that de la Clue was at sea on 9 February, cruised to the west of Gibraltar. In fact, de la Clue picked up two of the ships of the line from Toulon then headed back to Cartagena. He now possessed a respectable eight ships of the line with three more expected. Showing a highly professional understanding not only of the strategic context but of wind and weather, Osborn placed his entire squadron between Cartagena and the expected Duquesne. The wind allowed Osborn to reach Cartagena before Duquesne and if it turned, they would be able to beat de la Clue to the Straits.²⁵

The plan was perfectly conceived and executed apart from one vital point: Duquesne had left Toulon and reached Cartagena on 25 February. Here fortune intervened. For three days de la Clue and Duquesne had argued over precedence, and just as they had resolved the dispute Osborn arrived in the nick of time as a gale blew Duquesne into his path. The French ships scattered and Osborn detailed specific ships to chase them down while he took the remainder of the fleet to ensure de la Clue could play no part in what followed. The 50-gun *Oriflamme* was chased and run ashore by the 74-gun *Monarch* and 64-gun *Montagu* but she was now on neutral Spanish territory so nothing more could be done. The fast-sailing 26-gun frigate *Pleiade* escaped but two other French ships were not so lucky. Around 19:00 the 64-gun *Orphée* was engaged by the 64-gun *Revenge*, the latter soon supported by the 80-gun *Newark* and 50-gun *Preston*. After a short fight the French ship struck.

The final success that day was harder fought, involving as it did the French 80-gun *Foudroyant* carrying the flag of Duquesne heading out to take command at Louisbourg. She was chased by the 64-gun *Monmouth*, followed by the 70-gun *Swiftsure* and 64-gun *Hampton Court*. In the gloom *Monmouth's* Captain Arthur Gardiner brought his much superior opponent



Fig. 2.8. The Capture of the 'Foudroyant' by HMS *Monmouth*

(1,944 lb of broadside against *Monmouth*'s 1,164 lb) to action around 20:00. Gardiner had been Byng's flag captain at Minorca and was determined to seek out glory to eradicate the stain on his and his former admiral's honour. The action was hot and fought at close range. Gardiner was killed by a musket ball around 21:00. In four and a half hours *Monmouth* fired 1,546 round, 540 grape and 165 double-headed shot using up 80 barrels of gunpowder. Both ships had their mizzen masts shot away in quick succession, the loss of *Foudroyant*'s being greeted by loud 'Huzzas' as Gardiner's first lieutenant Robert Carkett continued the fight into the night. Sometime between 00:30 and 01:00 the next morning fire from both combatants died down. They had fought each other to exhaustion. Now the arrival of the *Swiftsure* sealed the victory. Fired upon by the *Foudroyant*, one and a half fresh broadsides from the *Swiftsure* saw the Frenchman strike. It was certainly a bloody fight, *Monmouth* had lost 28 killed and 79 wounded to the *Foudroyant*'s 134 killed and 90 wounded.²⁶

Coming after a run of naval failures, in taking two French warships and running another aground Osborn had certainly provided a tonic for British politicians and public. Even more important was that the Mediterranean

part of the French strategic plan to reinforce their position in Louisbourg had been well and truly undermined by a tactical victory off the coast of Spain. That was to have enormous consequences for the war in North America and beyond. Osborn continued the blockade of Cartagena until retiring to Gibraltar to refit his ships. Seizing his chance de la Clue put to sea, but headed back to Toulon where his fleet remained largely decommissioned. Once again the Mediterranean theatre became a sideshow in the Seven Years War.

CHAPTER 3

‘To protect the trade and annoy the enemy’

Home Waters, 1756–8

The Western Squadron

The concept of stationing a Royal Navy fleet in the western approaches to the Channel had developed during the War of the Austrian Succession. During that war Admiral Vernon had suggested the Western Squadron should focus on destroying the enemy battlefleet, or at least prevent it leaving port. By achieving either of these objects it would set the wider favourable conditions for cruiser squadrons to engage in commerce protection. Simply put, by cruising to the west of Ushant the Western Squadron could create a favourable environment for commerce protection. In a transatlantic war there was the temptation to send ships of the line overseas, weakening naval force in home waters. In 1755 Anson thought that dissipating naval strength overseas risked invasion and such fears need to be seen beyond the realm of mere naval strategy. The years 1754–7, from the death of Henry Pelham to the formation of the Pitt–Newcastle ministry, were a period of turmoil in British domestic politics, and it was only 11 years since the Jacobite rebellion of 1745. The last thing British policy makers needed was a French invasion attempt of the British Isles raising the spectre of conflict within the realm. In terms of policy and strategy, therefore, Anson’s focus was understandable.¹

It was a policy not without risk. The French could and did get ships to sea, while there were the inherent problems of sustaining the Royal

Navy's presence at sea with weather battering the ships and sickness afflicting the men. The Royal Navy also lacked knowledge of the French coastline, so operating close inshore was hazardous. Newcastle had pressed for a close blockade of the French coast, but was rebuked by Hardwicke who noted this was impossible, as ships could not remain on station long enough. In the autumn of 1755 Admiral Byng could only manage a month at sea before heading back to port, leaving just four warships off Brest and two off Ushant.²

By early 1756 Anson was trying to ensure the fleet could keep at sea in a more sustained manner. Maintaining the Western Squadron at sea on a consistent basis was the greatest logistical challenge facing the Admiralty, perhaps even the British state, in the eighteenth century. The most important factor was the health of the men, and that required the supply of fresh provisions. Ships had to leave their station and sail for Plymouth or Torbay to victual, and on 22 April the concept of rotating the ships of the Western Squadron was enacted. To implement this Boscawen, with nine of the line, and Admiral Holburne with five, were sent out to relieve Hawke. Hawke could then leave five or six of his ships of the line in the most seaworthy condition, along with all his frigates, with Boscawen. That would give the Western Squadron 20 or 21 ships of the line off Ushant all under Boscawen.³

From May 1756 Boscawen encountered the age-old problem: his fleet could only manage six weeks at sea before sickness afflicted his crews. To extend this Anson was still trying to implement the ship rotation policy. Once the invasion scare of 1756 dissipated (due to the French attack on Minorca) Boscawen could divide his force with ships to watch over Brest, Finisterre and Basque Roads. The problem of keeping ships at sea in winter remained, and Anson was convinced the 1755 winter cruise had worn-out ships and men, delaying Byng's sailing to Minorca. But he was also aware of the strategic effect of keeping the Western Squadron at sea. So although Anson had tried to keep a force on station by rotating ship visits to port, by the winter of 1756 the system was still hampered by the weather. Between January and April 1757 weather-related absences allowed the French to get three different fleets to sea. It was the intermittent nature of the Western Squadron's presence that allowed the French to send ships, troops and provisions overseas to influence the war



Fig. 3.1. Admiral Edward Hawke

in the West Indies and North America. When it was at sea the Western Squadron protected the British Isles, British trade and overseas possessions. It also allowed for much more, setting favourable conditions for the conduct of offensive operations in European waters and overseas. By maintaining a strong naval presence in European waters the Royal Navy could dominate the western approaches and the Channel so that the smaller ships of the Royal Navy and British privateers could continue the war on French commerce that had been unleashed in 1755.⁴

The small war in the Channel

By taking enemy merchant ships as prizes, interrupting trade and capturing French seamen, British privateers did play an important role in downgrading French naval capabilities. On the other hand, with the French battle fleets spending much time in port, French privateers were

extremely active in conducting a *guerre de course* against British trade, with 710 commissioned during the war. One of the Royal Navy's most successful frigate captains during these years was John Lockhart of HMS *Tartar*, who set about enemy privateers with relish. During several cruises in the lucrative waters of the Channel he took the 22-gun *Cerf*, 26-gun *Grand Gidéon* and in February 1757 the 20-gun *Mont Ozier*. Wounded in action with the *Mont Ozier*, after a period of convalescence he was back at sea taking the 26-gun *Duc d'Aiguillon* and 18-gun *Gramont*, then in November 1757 the 36-gun *Melampe* which was taken into the Royal Navy as HMS *Melampus*. Lockhart's aggressive spirit infused his crew, for while he had been ashore recovering from his wounds Lieutenant Thomas Baillie had taken *Tartar* out to sea and captured the 26-gun *Marie Victoire*, incorporated into the Royal Navy as *Tartar's Prize*.⁵

Nor was *Tartar* alone in her successes. The 50-gun *Aquilon* was run aground and wrecked near Brest in May 1757 by the 50-gun *Antelope*. That same month, the 50-gun *Duc d'Aquitaine*, a French East Indiaman, struck to the 60-gun ships *Eagle* and *Medway* in the Bay of Biscay. Later in the year off Brest the *Southampton* took the French frigate *Emeraude* of 28 guns. As well as enemy ships, other targets were attacked. In the summer of 1756 Captain Richard Howe led a small expedition in his flagship the 60-gun *Dunkirk* in company with a 20-gun frigate and a number of smaller vessels. He also had 300 men obtained from the garrison on Jersey. The object was to destroy a French fort under construction to the south on the Chausey Islands – so located it would provide a safe haven for French privateers and a potential base for a French invasion of Jersey. The French commander, recognising the overwhelming force under Howe, quickly surrendered and Howe destroyed the fortifications.⁶

Convoy protection

There was also the need to protect Britain's maritime trade – the key driver of the British economy and a crucial factor in the Royal Navy's capabilities. The close links between commercial interests and the political sphere ensured that commerce protection would be high on the Admiralty's list of priorities. The security of merchant shipping was a particularly sensitive issue in light of the 1740–8 war, when British trade

had suffered particularly severely at the hands of French privateers and much criticism had been laid at the door of the British government.⁷

Attacking enemy cruisers, privateers and privateer bases was certainly important, for that would deal with the problem at source, but it did not provide complete security. In home waters Royal Navy warships were deployed to protect the east-coast fishing grounds. To protect transatlantic trade the Admiralty implemented a convoy system. The job of a convoy warship was 'to protect the trade and annoy the enemy'. But, as the Admiralty instructions of February 1757 made clear, there was a bit more to it than that, as warships were to remain at sea until the convoy was ready or supplies were needed. It was not an excuse to remain in port. The convoy system was highly organised and became more complex as the volume of British trade increased. It also worked. One of the major problems was persuading merchants to sail in convoy; their commercial instincts were sometimes against sailing in a slow-moving convoy, for the first to arrive at market with their wares would guarantee higher prices before the market was flooded by the arrival of a convoy. The solution to this came from insurers, particularly Lloyd's, who offered reduced insurance premiums for ships sailing in convoy and might refuse insurance altogether if ships refused to adhere to the convoy system.⁸

The convoy system had two elements. Royal Navy sloops were stationed at key points in European waters to protect British trade, primarily in the Mediterranean, in the North Sea, the Channel and beyond the Irish coast into the Atlantic. Second, convoys themselves were accompanied by sixth rates and sloops to deter or even combat French privateers, while ships on convoy duties were stationed at the key landfall points overseas to meet convoys and escort them through dangerous waters. At the convoy assembly points sometimes hundreds of vessels would be collected in readiness to sail in one large convoy, and due to the largely predictable wind and weather patterns the sailing of convoys tended to have a set regularity, with sailing dates publicised in *Lloyd's List*.⁹

The importance of convoy protection continued during the war. In terms of warship numbers it was the most important role performed by the navy. In December 1755, of 137 Royal Navy ships 58 were assigned to convoy protection or were acting as cruisers. On the first day of 1757, out of 218 ships and 62,111 men in sea pay, 83 ships and 18,995 men were on

convoy duty. The majority of these vessels were sloops (30) and small sixth-rate frigates (20) compared to the 72 warships and 22,381 men deployed 'at home', though this latter figure included the largest number of first and second rates. The bare statistics also show the impact of operations. Six months later on 1 July the overall number had increased to 239 warships and 66,966 men in sea pay, and while the number on home service had declined to 55 warships, the marked increase was in the West Indies and North America, which had jumped up to 63 warships. Yet even with a major overseas expedition underway in North America, the largest number of warships was still devoted to convoy protection. It must also be remembered that convoys could be escorted in an aggressive manner. On 4 February 1757, Andrew Wilkinson in the *Diligence* was on convoy duty when two privateers made for the merchant ships, one taking the last vessel of the convoy. Meanwhile, Wilkinson had taken the first privateer, the *Swan*, after chasing it down for two hours, before forcing the second to bear away, abandoning its prize. The same month, on 20 February, Thomas Taylor of the *Badger* sloop was escorting a convoy when he took two privateers.¹⁰

Defending Hanover and supporting Prussia

Royal Navy resources were also required to support British interests on the European mainland. By 1757 it was believed at Versailles that France was already losing the war at sea. A means of redressing the balance was needed and that could only be achieved by occupying Hanover. Fortunately, most British statesmen saw the value of supporting Prussia in order to defend Hanover and to keep France tied up in Continental Europe. Pitt obtained the support of parliament for a grant of £200,000 to King George II to be used to keep an Army of Observation, composed of Hanoverian soldiers shipped from England, plus soldiers from other German states, in the field to assist Prussia and to defend Hanover. Numbering over 30,000 men its commander would be the Duke of Cumberland, son of George II.¹¹

The French launched their invasion of Westphalia in May 1757, and by mid-June were poised to invade Hanover. Cumberland, sailing from England to Stade at the mouth of the Elbe, was followed by 8,000

Hanoverians shipped out from England (who had originally been shipped to England to help with home defence). His operations would be defined by sea and river access for landing the army, transporting its supplies and, if the worst came, for its evacuation. Cumberland's campaign ran into immediate problems, and in June his army was pushed back across the Weser river. The French commander, Marshal d'Estrées, decided to lock up his left flank by taking the port town of Emden on the Ems river. All realised the value to Cumberland's army of this vital logistic link from which he could draw supplies from the sea. A Royal Navy cruiser squadron under Captain Hyde Parker was on its way to assist the Prussian garrison, but a small French force arrived outside the town on 2 July and the next day Emden surrendered. Cumberland was now cut off from his link to England; supplies would have to be shipped to Stade, far to the rear of the army.¹²

It seemed as though Britain might not be able to save Hanover after all, but continuing operations in Germany could provide something more valuable to the wider British war effort. Of course, British support depended upon the war in Germany continuing, and after Frederick's crushing defeat at the hands of Austria at Kolin, in Bohemia on 18 June, and then Cumberland's defeat by d'Estrées at Hastenbeck on 24–7 July, the situation had degenerated rapidly. By late August Cumberland was retreating upon Stade and the situation had become desperate, with limited supplies and no transports for an evacuation. The situation for the French was also degenerating, for although Parker had arrived too late to save Emden, he did commence a blockade of the French-held coastline. When the French occupied Bremen and Hamburg, Cumberland directed Parker to blockade the mouth of the Weser river, bringing a halt to shipping and cutting French supplies arriving by sea and then by river. Nevertheless, Cumberland grasped the opportunity provided by the new French commander, Richelieu, to negotiate a convention, signed on 8–10 September at Klosterzeven. The Army of Observation was restricted to Stade and the eastern bank of the Elbe with the French occupying much of Hanover while Parker's blockade of the Weser was to be lifted. George II was furious and recalled Cumberland.¹³

Both sides managed to wriggle out of the commitments made at Klosterzeven and the Hanoverian army would shortly be reconstituted, but two events in late 1757 were more important for the immediate

safety of Hanover. On 5 November Frederick crushed a French army at Rossbach in Saxony. Frederick followed this up by defeating the Austrians at Leuthen in December. Now Richelieu's army would not have a peaceful winter, for it was the only Franco-Austrian army available for offensive action and it was now vulnerable.

Frederick had been keen to have a Royal Navy fleet committed to the Baltic to prevent Russia moving supplies for its army by sea. The British envoy to Prussia, Andrew Mitchell, had pressed The Earl of Holderness, Secretary of State for the Northern Department, on this in June 1757. Pitt was particularly unwilling to countenance such a major deployment – the last thing Britain needed was a conflict with Russia, the source of vital naval stores, or to upset Denmark who might close the entrance to the Baltic to British shipping. Mitchell was informed that it was pointless to send a fleet unless it outnumbered the Danes and Swedes, and that was a subsidiary concern when set against more pressing naval deployments, while operating in the Baltic would be difficult for the navy. The navy's role was to protect British trade, which would allow Britain to be able to afford to provide Frederick with subsidies to help his war effort. Only a few cruisers could be spared for operations off the German coastline and, under Parker and then Commodore Charles Holmes, they were already having a positive effect. The fundamental tenet of British maritime strategy was explained by Holderness who, under direction from Pitt, wrote to Mitchell on 17 July 1757:

we must be Merchants while we are Soldiers; that our Trade depends upon a proper exertion of our Maritime Strength; that Trade and Maritime Force depend upon each other; and that the Riches, which are the true Resources of this Country, depend chiefly upon its Commerce.

Here, in a nutshell, was the thinking that underpinned Pitt's entire grand strategy for winning the Seven Years War.¹⁴

Frederick was not pleased, but was keen that Britain should indirectly support him at the strategic level by launching raids upon the French Atlantic coast to tie down French forces and prevent their deployment to operations in Germany. This did fit very neatly with Pitt's thinking, for such raids could target French naval bases thereby contributing to his

overall strategy of maritime dominance. If such raids distracted French troops from the German theatre of operations it was an added bonus. Finally, successful British raids on the Atlantic coastline would be a highly visible display of the British use of seapower to land troops at will, and that might give the French something to think about regarding a possible threat to the flank or rear of their army in Hanover.

Learning about joint operations: The Rochefort expedition, 1757

Pitt's strategy for descents on the French coast was reliant upon two factors. The first was having Royal Navy ships and British troops available to implement the raids; the second was for the French to be unable to interfere. With regard to the latter, Pitt was aware that the French had been collecting a large naval force at Louisbourg, so the Royal Navy would have undisputed command of the Channel even though it had itself made a major commitment to sending an expedition to try and take Louisbourg. In that sense speed was of the essence, and on 14 July, even though Newcastle, influenced by the King, wanted the troops sent to Germany, the Cabinet assented to Pitt's plan to launch a raid on Rochefort. Procrastination followed, with further attempts to divert the troops and naval force to the Baltic, but Pitt stood firm, even threatening to resign. Pitt realised that even if Cumberland were pushed back into Stade, British seapower could maintain him there while the French, at the extremity of their overextended land supply routes, could not maintain themselves outside its walls.¹⁵

Crucial to Pitt's thinking was destroying the French ships and the dockyard facilities at Rochefort. Despite the difficulties in getting ships in and out of Rochefort, the port, along with Brest, were the only two Royal Dockyards on the French Atlantic coast. The object was made clear by Pitt in his orders to the naval commander, Hawke, to descend on the French coast near Rochefort and 'to burn and destroy, to the utmost of your power, all docks, magazines, arsenals, and shipping that shall be found there'. Whether the attack was successful or not, if Hawke judged further landings practicable then secondary targets for the expedition were Lorient and Bordeaux.¹⁶

The striking force comprised 8,000 men in ten infantry battalions (around a quarter of the infantry then in the British Isles), two freshly raised marine battalions along with two companies of artillery and a troop of horse in 65 transports, escorted by 16 ships of the line and 12 frigates. Delays in assembling the necessary transports saw the expedition weigh anchor at Spithead on 8 September. On 20 September Hawke was off Basque Roads but could not get in that evening.¹⁷

With a significant part of their navy across the Atlantic and with a lengthy coastline to defend, the French were caught unawares. But the British army commanders, Sir John Mordaunt and General Conway, both lacked faith in the plan. Army officers also later criticised Hawke for not running straight into the port, but Hawke was unsure of the danger posed by the French batteries on the Island of Aix, in the middle of the roads. It must be reduced first and that task was assigned to an advanced squadron under Sir Charles Knowles.¹⁸

On the night of 20 September a French ship of the line blundered into Hawke's fleet before being chased into the Bordeaux river, delaying his operations. It then took several days, working against wind and tide, with only one knowledgeable pilot willing to guide the ships, until at the fourth attempt the fleet worked into Basque Roads on the evening of 22 September. Around 10:00 on 23 September, Captain Richard Howe in the 74-gun *Magnanime* led the attack on Aix; the fort opened fire around 12:00 but Howe held his nerve and his fire until at around 13:10 he was within 40 yards, whereupon he unleashed his broadsides. Five minutes later the 80-gun *Barfleur* followed Howe into action, and within 35 minutes the defenders, overawed by the weight and sheer force of close range British broadsides, surrendered. With the fort now reduced, the 30-year-old chief of staff for the army, Colonel James Wolfe, went ashore on Aix Island and from there assessed the state of French defences on the mainland. His recommendation: immediate attack. That night a naval reconnaissance of the mainland recommended landing the troops at Châtelailon before marching along the road to Rochefort, 11 miles away. It all looked promising; Rochefort was there for the taking.¹⁹

That was until Mordaunt called a council of war on 25 September, as his orders permitted, at which the army generals spent all day exploring



Fig. 3.2. Chart and soundings of Basque Roads showing the important Ile d'Aix

every reason for not landing. Army vacillation continued for a further two days. Increasingly frustrated, Hawke brought matters to a head on 28 September, demanding the army must attempt something, but further excuses were brought forward until Hawke told them he would sail home as they had no willingness to mount any military operation. The expedition arrived back in England on 7 October and by 26 October Hawke had the Western Squadron at sea again cruising off Ushant.

It had been an utter failure and was the subject of public fury. Pitt pointed to the officers operating upon the '*Byng-principle*, that nothing is to be attempted where there is any Danger or Hazard'. Mordaunt was court martialled but his orders had not stated he must land the army, and he was cleared on a technicality, though he had earned the immense displeasure of the King and never served in a field command again. What was particularly galling was that Rochefort had indeed been ripe for the picking – intelligence fed to the British government confirmed that if the army had landed Rochefort would have fallen.²⁰

The Rochefort failure marked the start of a change in British thinking about amphibious operations. It was Hawke's first experience of this type of operation and he had tried to brush up on his reading of previous amphibious operations prior to the expedition. He seems not to have grasped all the subtle complexities involved: his evidence to Mordaunt's court martial stated that the Admiral's duty was to get the troops to the landing site, help them find a landing site and then support operations once they were ashore. That seemed pretty simple, the nub of the issue was whether the army should land or not. As with all amphibious operations, the main problem was ownership of the transit area – the navy were in control at sea, the army on land, but what about the landing itself? That required close army and navy cooperation to ensure the needs of both services were met. The new *modus operandi* after Rochefort was for the navy to assume responsibility for the operation until the land forces had left the boats and made it to the shore, when the army commander would assume responsibility. In essence, Rochefort marked the birth of the British concept of 'joint operations'.²¹

While the Rochefort expedition had little *immediate* direct effect on the war in Germany in 1757, the worry that it might be repeated caused Versailles to draw 12 battalions and 30 squadrons of horse back from

Germany in 1758 to be available for coastal defence. At the very least, the threat of further British raids was interrupting French planning for 1758, for it heightened the possibility a British expedition might land on the left flank or in the rear of their army in Hanover. The exertions of Commodore Holmes at Emden only served to reinforce this possibility.

The Royal Navy takes Emden

With hostilities renewed in northern Germany, Prince Ferdinand of Brunswick took command of the renamed His Britannic Majesty's Army in Germany. Ferdinand seized Hamburg but the French once more took Bremen. Pitt was still unwilling to commit British troops to the defence of Hanover, but naval force was another matter. Commodore Holmes was directed to blockade the Weser, arriving there on 28 February 1758. His was the first ship to have entered the river since the ice had thawed and he immediately opened up a line of communication with Ferdinand and began to seize Bremen shipping.²²

With Ferdinand pushing forward, the new French commander, Comte de Clermont, withdrew to the Weser. Reports of activity in British ports and the appearance of Holmes and his squadron of two frigates, a bomb ketch and a cutter, at Emden on 12 March gave further weight to French fears for their maritime flank. One of Holmes' frigates ran aground and had to be sent with the *Stromboli* bomb ketch home for repairs. Undaunted, and flying his commodore's pennant in the *Seahorse*, he spent a number of days working out how to get his ships into the river, for the Ems presented a number of navigational challenges, especially as the navigational buoys had been removed. With the *Stromboli's* return, Holmes masterfully navigated the squadron into the Ems and within sight of Emden, forcing the surprised Franco-Austrian garrison to start the construction of hastily built seaward batteries. On 18 March he moved further up river, cutting the waterborne supply line to the garrison. The Franco-Austrian garrison, numbering some 3,720 men, evacuated Emden.²³

In fact, faced with an advance by Ferdinand's army, Clermont had decided to downgrade the Emden garrison and Holmes' aggressive activity turned that into an evacuation. It seems likely that even if

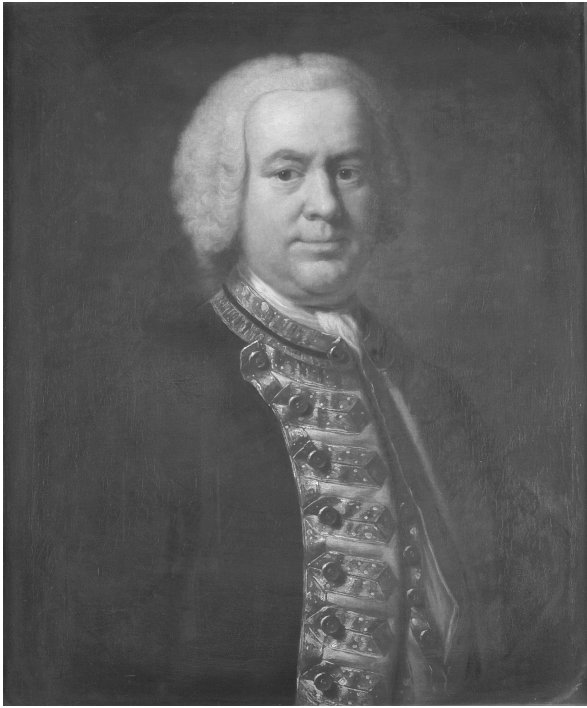


Fig. 3.3. Rear Admiral Sir Charles Holmes

Clermont was pushed back to the Rhine (as he indeed was) the French would have tried to keep some presence in Emden for the following campaign. In British hands it was a constant menace, positioned on the left flank of any French advance into Germany while also serving as a vital logistical link to supply Ferdinand's army. Pitt realised the value and even sent a battalion of the 51st Regiment of Foot to garrison Emden. They were the first British troops committed to the war in Germany. Upon their arrival Holmes withdrew his squadron, leaving a couple of sloops in the river.²⁴

Hawke's attack on Basque Roads, 1758

As part of a three-fleet strategy with a North American Squadron based in Halifax, and Osborn watching the exit from the Mediterranean, in early

March 1758 Hawke was instructed to collect ships from Spithead and Plymouth, including his flagship the 90-gun *Ramillies*. Hawke's orders bade him sail 'for protecting the trade of his Majesty's subjects coming into and going out of the Channel' and generally destroying any French ships he came into contact with. Intelligence pointed to the French preparing ships in Brest, Rochefort and other French Atlantic ports with supplies for Louisbourg while French East India Company ships were expected to depart from Lorient. Hawke, and the Western Squadron, was ordered to 'annoy and distress them in the most effectual manner'.²⁵

On 12 March Hawke was underway, but not for the first or last time a Royal Navy fleet was compromised by a lack of frigates; by 1 April he had only four frigates to support his fleet. Worse, he still only had eight ships of the line instead of the 14 originally intended by Anson. By 02:30 on 4 April Hawke was preparing to attack French ships in Basque Roads but was distracted by a convoy to windward. He gave chase but could not catch it. Returning back to his object around noon, at 16:30 he surprised five French ships of the line, around half a dozen frigates and 40 merchant ships lying near Aix. In an attempt to escape the French ships cut their cables but many soon stuck fast on the mudflats. Keen to avoid a similar fate Hawke brought his fleet to anchor abreast of Aix Island.

Sending out picket boats, Hawke kept his ships under guard all night until at 05:00 on 5 April he saw, just five or six miles away, all of the French ships aground. Many were on their sides and Hawke lamented not having fireships and bomb-vessels with his fleet. Nevertheless, something had to be done quickly to take advantage of such a glorious opportunity. Hawke sent particularly direct and clear instructions to Captains Patten of the *Intrepid* and Proby of the *Medway* to receive on board the best pilots in the fleet in order to close with the stranded French ships and destroy them. But after a short distance, *Intrepid* and *Medway* found the water too shallow. By now some of the French warships were trying to drag themselves out of the mud, throwing stores, guns, ballast and such like over the side to lighten their hulls. Several escaped into the River Charente but the majority of the merchant ships were left aground. Boats from Hawke's frigates busied themselves cutting away buoys the French had left to mark abandoned guns and stores. Meanwhile, Hawke put

ashore Captain Ewer and 150 marines to destroy fortifications on the Isle de Aix. Hawke sailed on 6 April and, with a further 15 French storeships discovered at Bordeaux, displayed a nuanced grasp of grand strategy. If the French did not have warships ready to provide an escort 'the present circumstances of their settlements may oblige them to sail without convoy'. He directed two ships of the line and four frigates under Keppel to 'cruise upon them'. Hawke later learned that such was the French desperation, 12 of the Bordeaux ships had indeed sailed for Louisbourg with just a single frigate as escort. This convoy had been mauled by the *Essex*, *Proserpine* and the *Pluto* fireship. The French frigate had been taken, along with a 20-gun privateer and one of the merchant ships. Keppel remained, menacing Basque Roads. Hawke may have failed to destroy the French ships in Basque Roads, but it was still a strategic success. The object had been to prevent the main French effort during 1758 to ship supplies and provide naval reinforcements to Louisbourg; by running into Basque Roads and spreading chaos among the French ships, Hawke had achieved the object of his mission.²⁶

St Malo and Cherbourg, 1758

By 1758 the Royal Navy was approaching full mobilisation and the war was entering a crucial phase. What Pitt needed now was additional resources to fight and win the war in North America while ensuring British interests were protected in Europe and overseas. Of course, all this would cost money. Here superior British financial resources and credit, based upon the free flowing of British trade and commerce, protected by the Royal Navy, gave Britain a fundamental advantage over France in exactly the type of conflict both were now engaged in. It would be needed: the estimates of expenditure that Pitt desired for 1758 totalled £10,486,457. While operations in North America would be the focus of British planning (see Chapter 5), this had to be balanced against the European dimension of British grand strategy, including paying for Ferdinand's army as well as subsidies to Prussia that equated to about 80 per cent of the money Frederick needed for his army. Money would also be spent to continue Pitt's raiding strategy into 1758. This was not only important in order to interrupt French planning for their campaigns in

Germany, but by doing so it allowed the navy and army to continue a process of learning how to conduct successful amphibious operations that would have ramifications way beyond the French coastline. It also might mask the main British effort for 1758 in North America.²⁷

The first Channel raid in 1758 would coincide with an offensive in Germany from Ferdinand. The plan, as Holderness related to Ferdinand on 5 May 1758, was 'to make the diversion useful it must be lasting, and accordingly we are seeking a place whence we can seriously hurt the enemy and maintain ourselves against a superior force, while keeping open our communications with the sea'. The target selected was St Malo, which could, it was hoped, be easily defended once taken in a surprise attack, and which offered safe evacuation if the necessity arose. Attacking St Malo had further advantages, for it would remove a major French privateering port. In the summer of 1757 François Thurot had commanded a French privateering squadron out of St Malo, putting to sea with two powerful 36-gun frigates the *Maréchal de Belleisle* and *Chauvelin*. With British merchant ships his target, on 25 July he encountered the 32-gun *Southampton* which fended off Thurot's attack. Destroying ships and facilities at St Malo would deal with the privateering problem at source.²⁸

The plan was for 22 ships of the line and eight frigates of the Western Squadron, now under direct temporary control of Anson (due to Hawke resigning in a fit of pique and then being reinstated as Anson's second in command), to keep a watch over the French fleet in Brest. Anson did not intend to shut up the French fleet in port; instead he left Brest open, hoping they would come out and allow him to bring about a decisive naval action. Either way, Anson's Western Squadron would guarantee local naval superiority to the St Malo force, a huge fleet of 150 ships under Commodore Howe comprising five of the smaller ships of the line, ten frigates, five sloops, two bomb-vessels, a couple of fireships and a hundred transports, plus storeships carrying a landing force of 14,000 men. Following the Rochefort debacle, the navy now would be responsible for not just getting those troops to St Malo but also landing them in tactical order. Here Howe's ships were equipped with specially designed flat-bottomed boats. Developed after Rochefort and carried on transports and

temporarily, a key privateer port. St Malo itself, however, remained untouched as the British army were unable to bring over suitable guns and mortars due to the terrible French roads. Howe tried to ferry them across to Saint Servan but could not get his ships into the port. Fearing the French would launch a counterattack (there were in fact very few French troops in the area) Marlborough suffered a loss of nerve and decided to re-embark. All British troops were back on Howe's ships by 12 June without losing a man. Howe's fleet spent the next week or so battling against contrary weather to get out of his anchorage. Once out the fleet kept the coastline in a state of perpetual alarm, threatening Le Havre, Honfleur and Cherbourg. With the troops suffering from seasickness and with victuals running low the fleet returned to Spithead on 30 July. Due to the short-term nature of the landing, contrary to what Pitt had intended, the danger was over quickly and once it was clear the expedition was re-embarking the French pressed Clermont to counterattack Ferdinand.³¹

The St Malo expedition had not achieved all its objects, but with Ferdinand advancing and Emden in British hands, Newcastle suggested a maritime expedition could initially feint a landing in the Low Countries, to the rear of the French army, before the troops actually went on to join Ferdinand's army. By the end of June it had been agreed that this force would number over 7,000 men under Marlborough; it landed at Emden on 23 July. That month Newcastle wrote to Anson expressing his delight at the return of a continental policy. The problem for Newcastle was that he was viewing the separate parts of the war as just that, individual operations. On the other hand Pitt fundamentally viewed the war in Germany, descents on the French coast and the war overseas as part of a grand strategy. In that wider perspective it had to be centred on maintaining and exploiting maritime supremacy, and Pitt had not given up formulating ideas for operations against the French coast, a strategy Ferdinand continued to agree with.³²

Preparations for another descent began on 12 July but this time, given the events happening in Germany, it would be a pure diversionary raid. On 1 August Howe sailed again with 11,000 troops, this time the target was the French privateering port of Cherbourg, which he anchored off on 5 August. The landing did not take place until 7 August, giving the French some time to prepare. Nevertheless, in a textbook amphibious landing,

Howe's frigates, bomb-vessels and sloops covered the landing with their guns firing on French positions while the infantry in their flatboats closed with the shore. All the infantry were landed that day with the remainder of the expedition the next morning. There followed another week of spreading havoc on French soil. By 15 August all the forts defending Cherbourg had been levelled, guns had been destroyed, port facilities wrecked and the shipping in the harbour taken, burned or scuttled. The next day the entire force had re-embarked. Once again, Howe had left the French coast in a state of alarm.³³

Howe sailed again on the last day of August, arriving off the coast to the west of St Malo on 3 September. While the weather had proved troublesome earlier in the year, now it was dangerous. After landing 7,000 men, the surf prevented further communication between the fleet and those ashore, the latter including Howe himself. The troops moved along the coast towards Matignon where Howe, having finally rejoined the fleet, was waiting to re-embark the soldiers. Ill practice among the army high command allowed a French force of around 10,000 men to catch them, overpowering the rearguard. Under fire from French batteries, Howe led the seamen of the fleet in taking off as many soldiers as could be got away. The army lost up to 1,000 in total casualties, including around 600 men held by the French as prisoners. The navy lost 32 men, eight seamen killed and 17 wounded, a lieutenant killed, two midshipmen wounded. Four captains who 'had remained to the last trying to get the men off', had been taken prisoner by the French, Howe lamented. It was a tactical disaster, with operational and strategic repercussions. If the army high command had been about their business, the entire force would have been re-embarked without loss; instead the whole episode raised questions about the efficacy of Pitt's strategy for raiding the French coast.³⁴

Continental-centric historians consider Pitt's raids a failure, for the French 'withdrew no soldiers from Germany', or misunderstand their maritime objects. Although 15 infantry regiments and a number of horse regiments were sent back to France, the reason was to recuperate after the losses of 1758. On the other hand, the British forces involved were primarily for home defence, and it was better to use them to take the war to French soil in support of Ferdinand's campaigns in Germany and

Frederick's wider war effort. Pitt always claimed that small mobile maritime forces tied down a larger number of French troops, around 30,000 in Brittany and Normandy. Along the French coast the threat of a British descent necessitated the deployment of somewhere in the region of 70 to 80 battalions of regular troops, but the figures could even have been as high as 134 infantry battalions and 56 cavalry squadrons. These were men who could not be sent to Germany to allow the conquest of Hanover in 1758–9. Instead, troops destined for service against Frederick had to be diverted to the French army opposing Ferdinand, and that had an intrinsic value to the Prussian war effort, while the destruction of privateers, warships and shore facilities contributed to British maritime security in the Channel by undermining the French ability to harm British maritime trade.³⁵

With Pitt's raiding strategy now put on the back burner, the Western Squadron returned to its more traditional role, and with Hawke ill command was bestowed upon Admiral Charles Saunders. He did not sail until 11 October and arrived off Ushant to find that three French sail of the line had made it out into the Atlantic. In a gale he also missed four ships of the line and three frigates coming in from Quebec. The final indignation came with the escape of five sail of the line escorting a large convoy through the difficult southern passage out of Brest. Frustrated by the bad weather, Saunders left a few frigates off Brest and returned to port.

Between 1755 and 1758 the Western Squadron had not scored a major success against French naval forces in European waters and the French had continued to escape and to influence the war overseas, particularly in North America. However it had successfully protected British trade while wiping French trade from the seas. Moreover, despite the loss of Minorca, the British Isles had remained under constant protection against a French invasion attempt. The next job was to enhance its effectiveness by keeping it at sea for longer, and thereby close the noose on French naval forces and, perhaps, to even bring them to battle. Finally, the Western Squadron had provided the freedom for Britain to ship large expeditions overseas.

CHAPTER 4

‘It would be a pity to disappoint them’

The West Indies, East Indies and Africa

The West Indies

Trade sat at the heart of Britain’s interests in the West Indies. It took two forms: transatlantic trade between the region and Europe, and trade within the Empire, primarily with the British colonies in North America. Around 85 per cent of British West Indian trade was with England, the remaining 15 per cent with the colonies in North America. Although rum and molasses formed an important part of Britain’s transatlantic economy, sugar was king. By 1748 British sugar imports comprised 30 per cent of all British transatlantic trade. In 1748 imports of West Indian sugar amounted to 41,425 tons, with Jamaica accounting for 17,399 tons, the Leeward Islands 17,584 tons and Barbados 6,442 tons. The sugar trade would further quadruple in the latter half of the century, forming the largest British import between the 1750s and the end of the century. There was also the need to protect the trade within the Empire itself. In 1759 British North American imports from the Caribbean were valued at £1,832,948 with trade to the value of £648,683 going the other way.¹

British policy in the West Indies focused upon protecting British islands and the transatlantic and intra-empire trade networks from French warships and privateers. With the Western Squadron focusing upon the French Atlantic fleet and the Royal Navy’s efforts to prevent the French

getting their Toulon fleet out of the Mediterranean, operations in the West Indies began at a local level. Operating in the West Indies provided unique challenges to the Royal Navy. The geographical scale was considerable and the prevailing winds made it difficult to operate in the Leeward Islands out of the Royal Navy's principal base at Port Royal, Jamaica, which had been established in 1721. So in 1728 a second base, at English Harbour, Antigua, had been established in the Leeward Islands.²

Such bases were not only places to repair ships; they were also centres for victualling and the supply of other stores. Victualling supplies sent out under convoy were crucial in sustaining the naval and army presence in the West Indies, though much of the navy's victualling needs were met by two contractors in theatre operating out of Jamaica and the Leeward Islands. The latter procured half its supplies from North America (bread, flour, rice, oatflakes) and half shipped from Ireland (beef, pork, butter). In contrast Jamaica received all its contractor imports from North America, a much shorter voyage than from Europe and with less danger from French privateers operating in home waters. It was only when large land forces were in theatre that extensive supplies were shipped out from Britain to accompany them and then later to sustain them – this occurred in 1759 for the attack on Guadeloupe when the first shipment of four months' provisions for 7,000 men left England in February with a second for six months' supply in May. Victualling supplies also went to North America, and to the force to attack Martinique in 1761 and the expedition to attack Havana in 1762, which required seven months' worth of victuals for 16,000 men.³

At an operational level, the Royal Navy's command in the West Indies had been split into two parts in 1745, and warships effectively operated independently out of both Jamaica and Antigua. In 1755 nine British ships were at Jamaica under Rear Admiral George Townshend with five operating out of Antigua under the command of Commodore Thomas Frankland. The prime job of the ships of the line was to create the conditions for wider commerce protection by keeping a careful watch over the main French West Indian bases. Heavy frigates and cruisers would concentrate on the focal points of the trade routes, such as the Windward Passage between Cuba and Hispaniola. Finally, smaller ships such as sloops served to protect coastal trade. France possessed a number

of advantages in the West Indies, her naval base at Saint Domingue was to windward of Jamaica, while Fort Royal, Martinique (the single most lucrative overseas French possession) in the Windward Islands threatened the Leeward Islands. Moreover, both the main French bases and a host of small bays, inlets and harbours throughout French islands in the region served as bases for privateers to prey on British trade.⁴

When war broke out Townshend sent his three ships of the line to watch over Cape François with his smaller ships in the Windward Passage. Nevertheless, this did not prevent the French from getting a squadron of four ships of the line and a couple of frigates into Cape François. Townshend was expecting three more French ships of the line to appear from Fort Royal where they had taken the 50-gun *Warwick*. Of his own command, he informed the Admiralty that the 60-gun ships *Dreadnought* and *Princess Mary* were woefully under-gunned and 'can hardly be looked on as of equal force with our new 50-gun ships'. He thought both incapable of laying alongside a French 74-gun ship. Townshend asked for at least one 'capital ship' to be sent out to counterbalance the two French 74s now in the region. Unable to take the offensive, he was determined to protect British trade for the remainder of 1756.⁵

In early 1757 a French squadron of five ships of the line under Admiral Bauffremont arrived to attack British trade before heading north to Louisbourg. Townshend had divided his force and Bauffremont captured the 50-gun *Greenwich*, further depleting Royal Navy resources. Townshend fell back on Port Royal leaving British commerce bereft of protection and at the mercy of French warships and privateers, while calling for reinforcements from Frankland in the Leeward Islands. Townshend's orders to Frankland were discretionary and the inherent problems of operating in the region came to the fore: 'It will take long to let him know, as my despatch vessel must beat through the Windward Passage and then stretch a great way to the north before she can fetch the Windward Islands' he wrote to the Admiralty. In reality Townshend doubted any reinforcement would be forthcoming.⁶

Frankland had experienced his own problems, losing the *Warwick* on 11 March 1756 to the 74-gun *Prudent*. His orders focused on assembling at Antigua and subsequently escorting two yearly convoys from the Leeward Islands a safe distance into the Atlantic. The first convoy of 1757, sailing in

early June, comprised 170 merchant ships and was valued at £2 million. Frankland had also asked London for reinforcements, but with a major French force loose to the west he did not fail Townshend, sending him two of his precious ships of the line. Bauffremont had completely altered local conditions in the region and now Pitt, back in office and keenly aware of the importance of West Indian commerce to British financial well-being, determined to send reinforcements. Rear Admiral Thomas Cotes was sent to the Leeward Islands with the 90-gun *Marlborough*, two 60-gun ships, a 50-gun ship and six frigates. Cotes was to supersede Townshend at Jamaica, and once the ships there were taken into account Cotes would have seven ships of the line under his command.⁷

The key now was for the two British forces to unite before either could be attacked and defeated in detail by Bauffremont. Cotes sailed immediately for Jamaica but found his prey had fled. After attacking British trade, Bauffremont had followed his orders and sailed for Louisbourg. So while French local superiority had been effective it had also been transitory, and with Bauffremont now gone Cotes could take a more aggressive stance in dealing with French trade. He set to the task with relish, using his ships of the line to watch over the enemy squadron from Cape François while placing his lighter ships on the known trade routes, capturing three store ships and a transport. French efforts to get their trade together were delayed by Cotes' actions until the autumn. With his deployment also protecting British trade, more than 150 British merchant ships left the Caribbean.

In October, Cotes received intelligence that the French were finally preparing a convoy to leave Cape François, and he detached a force under Captain Arthur Forrest to intercept them. When Forrest, in his flagship, the 60-gun *Augusta*, arrived off the harbour at Cape François he found that the French force escorting the convoy was much larger than Cotes had believed. Cotes surmised the French would only have three or four ships. In fact they had been reinforced, and their commander the Admiral Comte de Kersaint had at his disposal two 74-gun ships, one 64, one 50 and one 44, plus three large frigates.

With the French making sail on 21 October Forrest called a conference on board the *Augusta* with the captains of his other two ships, Captain Maurice Suckling of the 60-gun *Dreadnought* and Captain William

Langdon of the 64-gun *Edinburgh*. Forrest greeted his subordinates with 'Well, gentleman, you see they are come out to engage us'. Clearly heavily outnumbered, Suckling summed up the mood, noting that if the French were determined on a fight 'it would be a pity to disappoint them'. With Suckling and Langdon returning to their ships Forrest hoisted the signal to bear down on the French and engage. While expressing such fighting spirit was commendable and in the shadow of Byng at Minorca, perhaps understandable, despite the disparity in numbers Forrest, stationed to windward, held the upper hand. As long as his squadron remained 'in being', the French convoy could not sail and his position would make it tricky for the French to attack.⁸

The *Dreadnought* attacked the enemy van ship, with *Augusta* and *Edinburgh* taking the centre and rear respectively. It was an uneven fight, a 64 and two 60s against two 74s and a 64, with the *Greenwich*, now under French colours, trying to also close with Forrest's squadron. The first shots were fired around 15:20, and over the next two and a half hours the ships pummelled each other; the British firing low into the enemy hulls, the French firing high to disable masts and rigging. Kersaint's flagship the *Intrépide* suffered in the exchanges and just before 18:00 was towed out of the line by a frigate, his other ships of the line also broke off the action. In total the British had lost 23 killed and 89 wounded, shared pretty evenly among the three ships. French casualties were estimated at over 500 in total. The discrepancy was probably down to some muddled sailing in the French squadron, largely caused by the *Greenwich*, which exposed them to a considerable amount of British fire. 'Our Captains', Cotes remarked, 'were too gallant to be terrified at their formidable appearance', as Forrest's ships inflicted greater losses on the enemy in an extremely brave action. But it was a tactically indecisive action with wider repercussions, for Forrest's ships had suffered much damage aloft and had to retire to Port Royal to repair. That process took far longer than Kersaint's repairs and he managed to get his ships back to sea and the convoy out to sea. Arriving in European waters Kersaint's squadron and the convoy sailed into a storm; two of his ships of the line (including the *Greenwich*) and a frigate were wrecked.⁹

Kersaint's voyage home did, however, leave Cotes in a strong position in the West Indies as he could now concentrate on protecting British trade and attacking French commerce. Once again, ships were deployed on the

key sea lines of communication. Nine ships from a highly lucrative French convoy from Port-au-Prince were taken. To the east, in the Leeward Islands, Frankland had been replaced by Commodore John Moore. He wisely followed his predecessor's thoughts for deploying his resources. With his three ships of the line watching over Martinique, his cruisers were arrayed on the trade routes. Moore's ships took 25 French merchantmen in a ten-month period. With the French unable to contest British dominance in the West Indies, 1758 had witnessed a similar pattern of trade protection while attacking enemy trade. Up to this point there had been no attempts at major conquests. That would all change in 1759.¹⁰

The East Indies

On the far side of the world in the East Indies the competing and overlapping dynamics between France, Britain, colonial representatives and natives ensured that disputes and conflicts would occur and could be exploited for the benefit of Versailles or London. Essentially, local British and French military governors and commercial company officials looked for ways to expand their respective influences.

The French governor at Pondicherry, François-Joseph Dupleix, worked with Indian forces to extend influence across the Carnatic (South Eastern India), taking French rule closer to Madras. The British responded, scoring two important victories over French and native forces in June 1752. Dupleix's aggressive policy was frowned upon by Versailles and the French East India Company directors; uppermost was their fear of outright conflict with Britain. Dupleix was replaced by Charles Godeheu. Accompanying Godeheu was a fleet of French East India Company ships with 1,600 troops to prop up their defence of the Carnatic. This was viewed with increasing suspicion in London and caused English East India stock to drop by 7 per cent in just one day. The French protested they were defensive reinforcements, but by trying to deter any British aggression by strengthening their position their very actions brought about the escalation they sought to avoid. On 24 March 1754 a squadron under Admiral Charles Watson carrying 700 British army regular troops sailed for India. They arrived in theatre in September 1754 after Dupleix's removal and found the French, eager to avoid conflict with Britain in

North America and Europe, following a more pacific policy in India. Watson headed to Bombay to refit his ships.¹¹

The operations of the Royal Navy in the East Indies were closely linked to the operations of the Honourable East India Company (HEIC), which possessed its own military and naval establishment. The HEIC had already undertaken commerce protection operations in 1755, defeating pirates preying on HEIC ships along the Malabar Coast (South Western India). On the last day of 1755, operating out of Bombay, Watson detached his two sloops, *Bridgewater* and *Kingfisher*, to assist the HEIC's attempt to reduce the port of Geriah, north of Goa, from where the pirate Tulagee Angria was preying on British and Portuguese shipping. On 12 February 1756 Watson, flying his flag in the *Kent*, his second in command Rear Admiral George Pocock in the *Cumberland* and the rest of his squadron and a contingent of troops under Lieutenant Colonel Robert Clive, arrived off Geriah.

Watson divided his squadron, which included two HEIC ships *Protector* and *Guardian*, and bombarded the town and the fort. Some nine pirate ships and galleys were burned along with a host of smaller row boats while part of the town was set on fire. That evening resistance seemed to be slackening and Clive landed with the troops to occupy the town. Sporadic firing continued during the night and next morning Watson once more bombarded the town before it finally surrendered; Clive took possession on 14 February. The victors seized £130,000 worth of rupees, spices and other valuables. It was a visible example of the unity of purpose that existed between the commercial ends, ways and means of a trading company and the forces of the Crown. Watson sailed at the end of April for Madras on the Coromandel Coast.¹²

So far Watson's role had been to support British commercial interests by suppressing piracy. That changed during 1756, before news of the declaration of war between Britain and France reached India. It is easy to see the Seven Years War in India as completely separate from the rest of the war. The main priorities for both the French and British were protection of their own commercial interests and the destruction of the enemy's – territorial conquest was not envisaged by London or Versailles. It was a zero-sum game, with the ambitions of native rulers thrown into the mix. Yet decisions made in Europe did have an impact, and none more so than the presence of Watson's squadron at a crucial time.

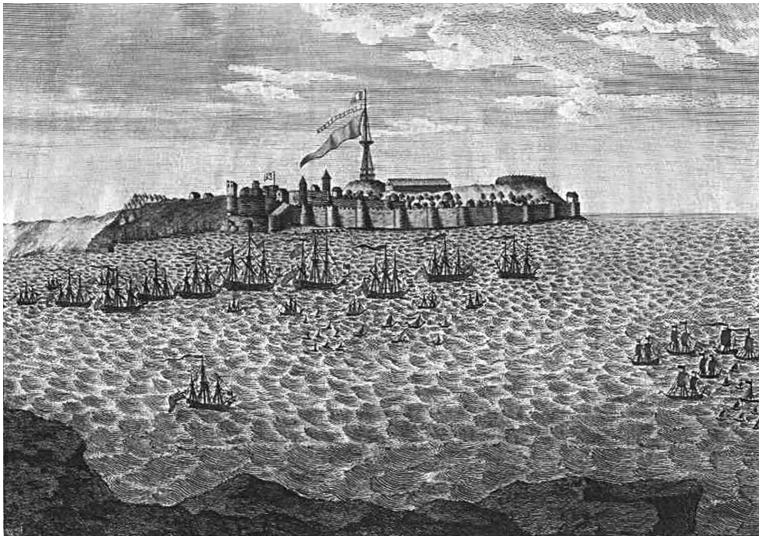


Fig. 4.1. The capture of Geriah, February 1756

On 16 June 1756 over 30,000 men, the army of Siraj-ud-daula the nawab of Bengal, appeared outside Calcutta. The British garrison numbered 500 men. Calcutta was taken and Fort William fell on 20 June. There then followed one of the most notorious events of the eighteenth century. British prisoners had been jammed by the nawab's forces into a small room in the prison of Fort William known as the 'Black Hole'. Next morning two-thirds had died from suffocation. It was an atrocity that demanded retribution.¹³

The news arrived at Madras on 16 August and it was Watson's ships that would prove vital to the success of the response. It took until October for the expedition to sail and then, battling against the wind, the fleet did not reach the Hugli until 8 December. Watson had lost the *Cumberland*, which had turned back, while one of the HEIC ships carrying artillery, munitions and stores had been delayed. He did add the purchased ship *Thunder* to his fleet, fitted out as a bomb-vessel. He then moved the squadron, with Clive and his 700 regular infantry, up the Hugli on 27 December, with around 1,200 Madras sepoys marching on land. Two days later Watson's *Kent* opened fire on the key river fort of Budge Budge and soldiers landed to besiege it. Skirmishing occurred during the night

and on the morning of 30 December the fort was occupied, having been largely abandoned by the defenders. The troops re-embarked. On 1 January 1757 other river forts were abandoned and Watson directed ship's boats to row upriver and burn enemy fireships. Early the next day Clive and his troops landed to commence the attack on Calcutta. There was some light fire from shore batteries directed against Watson's ships but when the ships closed the defenders fled. That left Fort William; *Kent* and *Tiger* bombarded the fort for over two hours driving the defenders out. Clive then took possession of Calcutta.¹⁴

Surmising the nawab would respond, Clive declared war on him in the name of the HEIC with Watson declaring war on behalf of the King. Watson was not idle; ships were sent 30 miles upriver to attack the town of Hugli while granaries were attacked at Gongee. Such waterborne attacks prompted a response, and by 3 February the nawab was poised to attack Calcutta. In a fog, Clive blundered into the nawab's camp. Clive's force was much inferior but it was bolstered by 600 sailors from the fleet hauling artillery and ammunition. Proportionally, Clive's force suffered greatly, 57 killed and 117 wounded out of a total of 1,870. Of the sailors 12 were killed with the same number wounded. The nawab's army suffered greater losses, over 1,000, but that was out of around 40,000 men. Shocked by Clive's aggression and the fighting spirit of the British, Siraj-ud-daula signed a peace treaty on 9 February giving in to most of the British demands.¹⁵

Almost immediately the peace began to break down. The nawab was slow in keeping to its terms and now a new issue arose, the French base in Bengal at Chandernagore was only 20 miles upriver from Calcutta. The French were hastily strengthening the defences, but the town and fort were weakly defended so while the French were unlikely to go on the offensive against Clive, the nawab was keen to haul them into his fight against the British. In March Watson and Clive pressed the nawab to fully implement the terms of the treaty while both looked to take advantage of an Afghan incursion which threatened Siraj-ud-daula's rear and which now led the nawab to ask for their help! It was only at this point that Watson received news from London that war between Britain and France had been declared. The British attack on Chandernagore could now proceed.

The French garrison numbered some 700 Europeans and sepoys. Once again it was the presence of Watson's ships that provided the vital advantage as the fleet moved upriver. The French had sunk ships to try and block the river, but on 19 March boats from the squadron picked their way past to destroy French fireships. On 22 March Admiral Pocock, having been rowed upriver in his barge, hoisted his flag in the shallow-draughted *Tiger*. On 23 March the naval and land bombardment commenced.

Things did not go according to plan. Watson in the *Kent* anchored in the wrong place due to casualties among the men working her cable, while the *Salisbury* could not find room to get into action. The bulk of the fight, therefore, fell upon the *Tiger* and the *Kent*. In a bloody fight with the French fort and batteries, the *Kent* suffered 19 killed and 74 wounded with *Tiger* losing 13 killed and 56 wounded, including Pocock who had been injured by flying splinters. Losses ashore were remarkably light, Clive's force losing one man killed and ten wounded. It was the Royal Navy that won the fight; after a couple of hours the French could stand no more and surrendered their most profitable commercial centre in India.¹⁶

But there remained Siraj-ud-daula. Three months after the fall of Chandernagore the nawab's forces of around 50,000 men met Clive's little army of just 3,000 in battle. The nawab's army initially pushed Clive back, but hampered by a plot to replace him and a thunderstorm which negated his artillery, Clive grabbed his chance, attacked and Siraj-ud-daula fled. The battle of Plassey, 23 June 1757, and Siraj-ud-daula's subsequent replacement by the chief plotter, Mir Jafar, are often seen as the start of British rule in Bengal. To some extent this is correct, but it was the Royal Navy that laid the foundations of Clive's great victory by retaking Calcutta and ending French influence at Chandernagore – without those two events Plassey might never have been fought. By 1765 around 60 per cent of the HEIC trade would be into or out of Bengal, and the company was granted the right to collect revenue from the territory's 20 million inhabitants providing it with around £3 million per annum.¹⁷

It was Admiral Watson's ships that had tipped the balance and allowed the Admiral and Clive to begin a programme of conquest. While greeted with joy in London, the conquest of Bengal did not change Pitt's war strategy; his focus was still on North America. The question now for



Fig. 4.2. Admiral George Pocock

Clive and Watson was would the French also try to send out reinforcements to swing events back their way? The answer came the day after Plassey when French forces seized the HEIC's port of Masulipatam, north of Madras. When Watson sailed north in 1757, the HEIC's Commodore James with the 22-gun *Revenge* and 24-gun HMS *Triton* had been left to watch over the French position at Pondicherry. James had been driven off by a superior French force carrying a regular infantry regiment which had allowed the French to launch their successful attack of 24 June 1757.¹⁸

Further French reinforcements were on the way, albeit in a haphazard fashion. Three of the four ships of the line France wished to send to India had been diverted to Louisbourg. Moreover, the rest of the expedition suffered from a number of misfortunes until it finally sailed from Brest on 3 May 1757 with one ship of the line and five India Company ships carrying four infantry battalions. The naval commander was Admiral Comte de d'Aché and he and his ships undertook a tortuous journey, via Rio de Janeiro, stopping off at Mauritius to pick up ships from there,

before finally reaching Pondicherry on 28 April 1758. Immediately upon making landfall the new French land commander, the Comte de Lally, determined to make a quick impression and began marching to seize Fort St David, an HEIC factory to the south of Pondicherry.¹⁹

Pocock and d'Aché

On 16 August 1757, Watson, his health undermined by service in the east, died and he was replaced by Pocock. Pocock remained in Bengal in case the French squadron appeared there until January 1758, when he sailed for Madras. Unfortunately the ageing *Kent*, the strongest ship in his squadron, could not be repaired and was abandoned at Calcutta. At Madras on 24 March he was joined by a squadron of four ships of the line under Commodore Charles Steevens, sent out from England in response to the sailing of d'Aché the previous year. The Admiralty's aim was still essentially defensive, to give Pocock parity with the French. All Pocock had to do was keep his fleet 'in being' to stop the French obtaining local control. That would be enough to secure British interests. Steevens arrived a month before d'Aché, and on 17 April Pocock sailed with the 64-gun *Elizabeth* and *Yarmouth*, 60-gun *Tiger* and *Weymouth*, 56-gun *Cumberland* and 50-gun *Salisbury* and *Newcastle*, plus a frigate and a storeship. In order to intercept the French squadron and protect Fort St David he had to beat to windward.²⁰

Arriving on 28 April, d'Aché won the race to Fort St David, forcing two of Pocock's frigates, the *Bridgewater* and *Triton*, to run ashore where they were burned by their crews. After detaching the 74-gun *Comte de Provence* to take Lally into Pondicherry d'Aché could only muster eight ships of the line. Nevertheless, he outnumbered Pocock by eight ships of the line to seven. But when Pocock came up he had succeeded in getting to windward of d'Aché.²¹

On 29 April, hoping to catch the French at anchor, Pocock signalled a general chase, but d'Aché succeeded in standing out to sea while trying to recall his detached ships. D'Aché formed up line of battle, and at 12:30, around three miles from the French line, Pocock tried to conform – but there were problems with ships taking up their designated stations. It was not until 14:15 that Pocock's *Yarmouth* bore down on d'Aché's flagship the

Zodiaque in the centre of the French line. Pocock's foremost three ships conformed to the leading French ships. Something then went wrong with the rest of Pocock's fleet as the *Cumberland* was late in getting into the action and the *Newcastle* and *Weymouth* both failed to close with the French line. For some time Pocock's leading four ships bore the brunt of the French fire. Pocock held his own broadsides until just before 16:00 when he signalled to open fire.

Fortunately, Pocock's problems were replicated in the French fleet. Around 16:30, as recalled by Pocock, 'the rear of the French line had drawn pretty close to their flagship. Our three rear ships were signalled to engage closer.' One of d'Aché's ships lost a rudder, another sheltered from the British ships and fired through its own line, and a third, the 36-gun *Sylphide* that should not have been in the battle line in the first place, was driven off after the first British broadside. It was largely left to the van and centre of each fleet to battle it out. In an increasingly confusing situation, *Cumberland* nearly crashed into the *Yarmouth* before finally taking up her place but the *Newcastle* remained unwilling to close with the French. The last British ship, *Weymouth*, passed on the windward side of the *Newcastle* to join the action and forced the *Moras* to drop to leeward. Adding to the general disorder two of the French ships suffered powder explosions, though they were not catastrophic. With the *Comte de Provence* wearing up from Pondicherry, the rear of Pocock's squadron was finally coming to bear. D'Aché decided enough was enough and headed for Pondicherry. Attempting a 'general chase', Pocock's ships were too battered. With night falling he gave up and assumed a position to windward to keep an eye on d'Aché's fleet. British losses were 29 killed and 89 wounded; losses on the French ships, which were also carrying troops, were heavier, 162 killed and 360 wounded.²²

Ashore, Cuddalore fell and Fort St David was invested by the French, and after a short siege the garrison surrendered on 2 June. The vital factor had been the regular French troops from Europe which had allowed de Lally to put around 3,100 Europeans into the field against under 1,000 British. Pocock now headed for Madras where the captains of the ships that had failed to close during the action were court martialled, the worst offender was Captain George Legge of the *Newcastle* who was dismissed from the Royal Navy. With his squadron reorganised and refitted, Pocock

wounded in Pocock's fleet compared to 250 killed and 600 wounded in d'Aché's, it was another tactically indecisive action.²⁴

Essential for both the British and French navies to project power in the region was the possession of bases, the British at Madras and the French at Pondicherry. Here damaged ships could be refitted, and as long as both sides maintained their shore-based naval capabilities, it would be difficult for either side to obtain local supremacy. But while d'Aché retired to Pondicherry to refit, Pocock was determined to stay to windward and bring on a third action with the French and so his fleet, suffering from damage aloft, made running repairs at Carical. To the surprise of both Lally and Pocock, d'Aché then gave the British naval superiority off the Coromandel Coast by sailing for Mauritius on 3 September. D'Aché's rationale was that his latest repairs had exhausted the naval supplies, especially rigging, and there was a paucity of material for caulking. He had also encountered difficulties sourcing victuals at Pondicherry, and that might have been related to the lack of money available to both d'Aché and de Lally. Finally, d'Aché had lost many sailors in his battle with Pocock and needed to find replacements. Pocock caught a glimpse of the French but could not bring on a third action, so he headed for Bombay to avoid the dangerous east-coast monsoon season, from September to March.²⁵

The danger to both Pondicherry and Madras came from land attack. Taking advantage of the French regular reinforcements de Lally, benefitting from the arrival of 1 million livres shipped out from France, marched on Madras and besieged the town on 14 December. Madras was saved by the arrival of two frigates under Kempenfelt with several transports containing troops and supplies to bolster the garrison. On 17 February 1759 de Lally lifted the siege. The French had missed their chance, for if d'Aché had been able to prevent Kempenfelt from reaching the town it must surely have fallen and the Royal Navy would have lost its key base on the coast. The failure to deal decisively with Madras would have serious repercussions for the French in India.²⁶

Africa: Senegal and Gorée

The Seven Years War can be considered as the first global conflict, for Anglo-French rivalry was also taken to Africa. Here operations fitted into

Pitt's wider policy for winning the war by destroying the French capability to fight while enhancing Britain's coffers and her bargaining position in the peace that would eventually come. The overriding policy driver was, therefore, commercial, as West African possessions had no inherent strategic value. The first of the French possessions attacked was Fort Louis, Senegal. Situated on a narrow island 13 miles upriver from the coast, Fort Louis was a centre for the gum and slave trade. Its seizure was suggested by a merchant, Thomas Cumming, who had previously been in West Africa and had local knowledge.

In early 1758 a purely naval expedition was collected at Plymouth under Captain Henry Marsh. Marsh, flying a commodore's pennant in the 50-gun *Harwich*, was accompanied by the 64-gun *Nassau*, the 20-gun *Rye* and the 16-gun *Swan*, along with two smaller vessels, the *London* and *Portsmouth*, and five small hired vessels. Tasked with taking possession of Fort Louis were 200 marines with a detachment of artillery. Cumming would sail with the expedition.

On 9 March 1758 Marsh weighed anchor, and after putting into Tenerife to take on water, arrived off the Senegal river on 23 April. The original plan had envisaged Cumming in the *Swan* acting in advance of the expedition to procure assistance from local tribes, but Marsh decided the force at his disposal would have to suffice. Marsh sent ship's boats upriver to take soundings and they came under fire from a French brig and six sloops moored above the bar to defend the navigable channel. It was not until a favourable wind blew on 29 April that the attack could go in. With the marines embarked in small boats, the *Swan*, *London*, *Portsmouth* and the hired armed vessels proceeded upriver. The navigation dangers posed were highlighted when the *London* was wrecked on the bar, though without loss. After that shaky start the expedition moved upriver and the French withdrew their boats to the fort. There the marines landed artillery and at that point the garrison surrendered. Sixteen French ships were taken and the capture of Fort Louis was valued around £200,000.²⁷

Ninety miles south was the French island of Gorée. This time, however, aware of the attack on Fort Louis, the French defenders were more prepared. When Marsh – having split his force to leave ships at Fort Louis – arrived off Gorée on 24 May and immediately began firing upon French positions, the return fire was so hot it damaged spars and rigging,

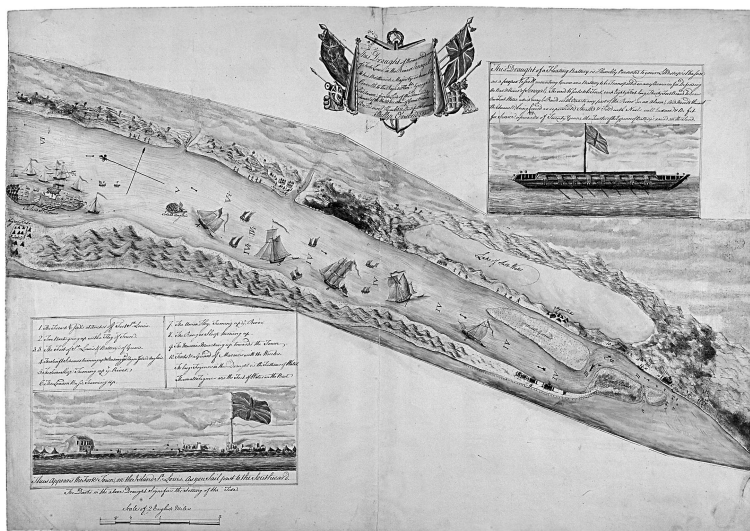


Fig. 4.4. The British attack on French positions along the Senegal river

and inflicted 20 killed and 40 wounded on his squadron. Marsh wisely judged that his force was too weak to press matters, and after two and a half hours of this unequal contest he cut and ran. Marsh, with the *Rye*, headed to the West Indies, escorting trade, and sent the *Nassau*, *Swan* and *Portsmouth* back to England.

Gorée had been saved for France, but the respite was temporary. In order to ensure its capture an expedition was readied to sail under Commodore Augustus Keppel. Keppel, in the 74-gun *Torbay*, had previous experience of the African coast and amphibious operations. Noting that Marsh had failed in the previous attack due to inadequate resources, the Admiralty gave Keppel a powerful squadron, for along with the *Torbay* he took with him the *Nassau*, 60-gun *Fougeux* and *Dunkirk*, 50-gun *Lichfield*, 44-gun *Prince Edward*, three sloops and two bomb-vessels. He left Spithead on 22 October, sailing to Kinsale, County Cork, to pick up the new British governor for Senegal, Lieutenant Colonel Worge, and four companies of British troops, originally destined for the West Indies. Keppel sailed for Africa on 11 November 1758.

Noting the delays and problems with army–navy relations that had scuppered the Rochefort expedition, Keppel identified a number of

factors that would be crucial for his mission to succeed. Detailed planning would ensure that each ship and boat of the fleet knew their role and destination ashore. Nearing the African coast, Keppel, like a modern staff officer, explained his plan to his naval and army subordinates and their roles within it. Each of the ships in his squadron carried flat-bottomed landing craft which would transport the troops to the shore. All would be coordinated by specific signals included in the plan. In the true spirit of jointery, Keppel included the soldiers in the process. The navy's job was to do more than just dump them ashore, instead Keppel's force was to dominate the landing area with its guns, row and deposit the soldiers at the right location in battle-ready formations, and continue to support them when ashore. There was a final part to Keppel's learning process from the problems of 1757: speed of action was a crucial factor in successful amphibious operations.

The *Lichfield* and a transport ship were lost *en route*, wrecked on the Moroccan coast with the survivors eventually ransomed back to Britain by the Sultan. So it was with a slightly depleted force that on the afternoon of 28 December Keppel dropped anchor four miles off Gorée. Early next morning the assault went in. The fire from the French garrison was hot and with some navigational challenges it took three hours for Keppel's squadron, led by the *Prince Edward* which had commenced the action at 09:00, to bring its guns to bear on the defenders. Not everything went to plan; a frigate and one bomb-vessel ventured too near the French batteries and suffered casualties with the bomb overshooting its target. It was now around noon and the French fort was subjected to overwhelming fire from *Torbay*, *Nassau* and *Dunkirk*. The defenders soon asked for a truce but not to be diverted from his object, Keppel continued the bombardment until the garrison surrendered. Keppel landed marines from the fleet to take 300 French defenders prisoner while Worge's troops, still in their flatboats, had not yet made it ashore. The French had lost 30 killed, the British 16 men killed.²⁸

While the seizure of French possessions in Africa is dwarfed by the Royal Navy's efforts in every other theatre of war, they are useful reminders of the commercial drivers behind strategy and naval policy. They had no strategic aim, at least in a military sense, for they would not divert French resources from elsewhere. They did have political and

diplomatic utility, perhaps to be bargained away as part of a peace, but the French would not give up Hanover in exchange for Senegal and Gorée. Instead, taking French African possessions would deny France the revenue from their trading activities and add it to British coffers. In that sense, it confirms Pitt's view that the war would be won by British maritime fiscal strength dependent upon the expansion of British trade and the Royal Navy.

CHAPTER 5

‘An entire good understanding between our Sea and Land Officers’

North America, 1756–8

The war for North America

Between the start of hostilities in 1754 and the surrender of the French in Canada in 1760, the main focus for British strategy was North America. In broad terms, there was a fundamental difference to the way North America was viewed by France and Britain. France tried to win North America by taking a defensive stance there, and winning the war by an aggressive policy in Europe. For Britain, it was the opposite; a defensive strategy in Europe would allow the war to be won in North America and other places overseas. This involved a major and sustained naval commitment to European waters, particularly off the French Atlantic coast and in the Mediterranean, to prevent the French from reinforcing colonial positions. The success or failure of that strategy would determine the course of the war in North America, as Canada would be starved of food imports, troops, ships and military supplies.

Once war was declared the French sent ships under Admiral Beaussier, two battalions of regulars and a new commander, Louis-Joseph Montcalm, to Quebec. On his return journey Beaussier's 74-gun *Héros* and 64-gun *Illustre* were attacked off Louisbourg on 26–7 July by the 70-gun HMS *Grafton*, flying the flag of Commodore Charles Holmes, assisted

by the 60-gun *Nottingham*. It was an inconclusive action, but it highlights the Royal Navy's ability to mount a sustained presence in North American waters. *Héros*, much damaged, had to put into Louisbourg for repairs. On 12 June the 50-gun *Arc en Ciel* carrying troops and supplies to Louisbourg had been taken by the 50-gun *Litchfield* and *Norwich* from Commodore Spry's squadron, which had wintered at Halifax to be in position to watch over Louisbourg and intercept French ships arriving off Canada. British attempts to interdict French ships heading for Louisbourg and Quebec would be stepped up over the next few years.¹

War on the Great Lakes

Inland, things had not gone well for Britain in North America. Oswego, situated at the south-east corner of Lake Ontario, was the key British position. In 1755 the British had decided to contest the waters of Lake Ontario and, with Forts George and Ontario, protect British interests. Some progress had been made under the supervision of Lieutenant Housman Broadley with a 70-ton schooner built along with three smaller vessels. But the British garrison at Oswego of 1,000 men spent the winter of 1755–6 starving to death, kept alive by supplies brought by river. They were reinforced in the spring of 1756 but their position was tenuous.²

While waiting for stores and guns to complete his small flotilla, Broadley was unaware that Montcalm was preparing to strike. The attack came across Lake Ontario in August. The defences at Oswego were incomplete and poorly sited; surprise was complete and, outnumbered and outmanoeuvred, on 14 August 1756 Oswego surrendered. The French took possession of stores and guns and, because the attack was so swift, Broadley had been unable to destroy his ships, gifting the French two sloops and a schooner, a row galley and a small vessel still half built on the stocks. Montcalm now had control of Lakes Niagara and Ontario, and using the inland waterways to maximise his advantageous position could threaten the British further east, strengthening the French situation in Canada. For the British, any invasion of Canada would now have to come from the sea, rather than using the lakes. This would involve the reduction of Louisbourg.³

Things continued to go badly for the British into 1757, with Montcalm directing his attention towards Fort William Henry, the British base at the southern end of Lake George. In March 1757 French raiders damaged the fort's defences and burned *bateaux*, vital for riverine transport, and a half-built sloop. That left the defenders bereft of the ability to command Lake George and prevent the French shipping down heavy artillery. By the end of July the French had 6,000 regulars and up to 2,000 Indian irregulars ready to strike. Fort William Henry's commander, Lieutenant Colonel George Monro, could assemble only 1,500 men.

On 23 July Monro launched a disastrous boat attack on the French position at Fort Carillon. All but four of his 22 boats were taken by the Franco-Indian forces. On 3 August a Franco-Indian flotilla of 250 *bateaux*, some carrying siege guns, and 150 Indian canoes could be seen on Lake George. Later that day the fort was surrounded and came under fire from Indian snipers. Next day the French besiegers broke earth, with the first heavy guns opening fire on 6 August. With no relief force to be expected and his defences badly damaged by French artillery, on 9 August Monro surrendered with his force guaranteed safe passage by Montcalm. This did not go down well with Montcalm's Indian irregulars who were after plunder, scalps and captives. They started on the wounded and next day they fell upon the rear of the column as it was making ready to leave the fort, massacring around 180 captive soldiers and camp followers with 300–500 more taken off as captives. The loss of Fort William Henry was a direct consequence of Monro's lack of naval resources to contest the French projecting power across Lake George.⁴

French naval deterrence at Louisbourg

As a quick win to bolster political support and to provide some good news to the British war effort following the disasters of 1756, Pitt hoped to see Canada conquered in 1757. But attacking Quebec was impossible until Louisbourg was taken. Located on Cape Breton Island, Louisbourg was a position of immense strategic importance for French interests in North America. While it did not block access to the Gulf of St Lawrence, the fortress city's harbour was a hub of commercial activity and privateering, while the naval establishment acted as a base for French warships to assist

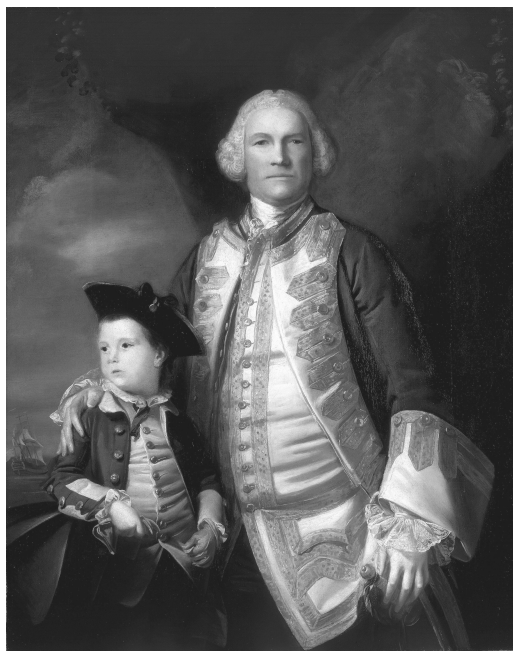


Fig. 5.1. Admiral Francis Holburne

in the defence of French possessions in Canada or to project power against British possessions. The main problem for the British was that any expedition against French territory beyond Louisbourg would always be risky with the city on its line of communication.⁵

The new commander in chief in North America, John Campbell, Fourth Earl of Loudon, had started thinking about how to take Louisbourg in late 1756. With formal approval from London, Loudon started to collect transports in New York to carry his force to Halifax. Planning had begun in London during January 1757 and in May Vice Admiral Francis Holburne sailed from the Royal Navy's victualling establishment at Cork with 14 ships of the line and transports carrying 6,000 troops. Unfortunately, recruiting the troops had been slow and unfavourable winds in the Channel delayed assembling the ships. When Holburne finally did sail he was two months behind schedule. A slow Atlantic crossing was finally completed on 9 July when he arrived at Halifax.

Loudon's force was already there. After Oswego Loudon had spent the remainder of 1756 and the early part of 1757 reforming the British American regular and provincial militaries in order to provide a land force to attack Louisbourg. Loudon had hoped to capture Louisbourg by the end of June, his force would then sail up the St Lawrence, by then free of ice, to attack Quebec. But it took until early June 1757 to assemble his force of 5,000 regulars. Further delaying the expedition was the lack of news of Holburne. More worrying news reached New York of a French fleet of five ships of the line off Halifax. Frustrated, Loudon decided to act. Admiral Sir Charles Hardy sent a couple of sloops to reconnoitre before the convoy of 90 transports with its escort of the 50-gun *Sutherland*, 20-gun sloops *Nightingale* and *Kennington*, the 16-gun *Vulture* and 14-gun *Ferret* sailed on 20 June. Sailing with such a weak escort was certainly a risk, for if the French fleet had fallen upon Loudon's force at sea the results would have been disastrous.⁶

In fact, the five French ships of the line were just one part of a complex scheme by which Versailles, aware of the British preparations as early as February 1757, placed a numerically superior naval force in North American waters. At both Minorca and now Louisbourg the French displayed inventive thinking about the utility of naval forces to achieve political and diplomatic objects. A French squadron of five ships of the line from the West Indies had sailed north while four ships had left Toulon and headed into the Atlantic. Aware that Holburne's force might need strengthening, Anson had provided him with five additional ships, taking him up to a total of 17 ships of the line. But the decisive operational failing for the British was nine French ships of the line slipping out of Brest and past the Western Squadron, blown off station by a gale. By 20 June, the very day Loudon began his risky sea voyage, all of these French ships were assembled at Louisbourg, whose harbour now contained 18 ships of the line and five frigates. It was a shock to Loudon, Holburne, Pitt and Anson.⁷

While it was unlikely that the French would use their fleet in an aggressive manner to try and obtain local control of North American waters, maintaining it as a 'fleet in being' in Louisbourg prevented any British expedition from entering the harbour and laying siege to the city. Loudon had arrived off Halifax on 30 June and was surprised to find the

expedition from England had not appeared. It was already late in the campaigning season when Holburne finally did arrive and the decision was made to drop any plan for attacking Quebec and to concentrate on Louisbourg. That required a reconnaissance to find out the strength of the French fleet, and Captain John Rous was sent with the 20-gun *Winchelsea* and three other frigates to look into the port. In the meantime Loudon landed the troops at Halifax and exercised them in an amphibious assault. It was not until late July that Rous returned with the inaccurate news that there were 3,000 men in the Louisbourg garrison and ten ships of the line in the port. With the campaigning season slipping away Holburne made ready to sail with his battlefleet and engage the French, thereby clearing the way for the transports to land the army.⁸

Just as the expedition was finally to commence its mission, on 4 August Holburne received intelligence from Captain Edwards of the *Gosport* who had found a list of the enemy ships on a prize he had taken. This confirmed the presence of the 18 French ships of the line, including three 80-gun ships. Holburne and Loudon called a council of war and called off the expedition. Loudon, aware that his 12,000 men comprised the only real striking force in British North America, judged the risks of losing it in a failed assault on Louisbourg too great; Holburne agreed.

While Holburne's force would probably have stood a fair chance of beating the French had they come out to engage in battle, this was highly unlikely, for a fleet battle was not the prime object of either commander. The French commander, Admiral de la Motte, had orders to defend Louisbourg, an object he had achieved by just being there. Holburne's orders from Pitt also made it clear that any fleet engagement was only a means to achieving an end. The 12,000 British troops at Halifax were now of little use and sailed for New York.⁹

With Louisbourg out of reach, at least for this campaigning season, Holburne was still keen to do something. On 23 August he implemented a blockade of Louisbourg, but the dangers of operating in North American waters in autumn and winter were brought home in late September when part of his fleet was battered by a hurricane. The 60-gun *Tilbury* was driven on to the shore and wrecked, with its survivors falling into French hands, while the 14-gun *Ferret* was lost at sea with all hands. Only seven of his ships had their full complement of masts, and Holburne was

concerned the French might sail and attack. He was, however, saved from this ignominious fate by the French policy of concentrating on the mission first rather than trying to deal a blow to British naval power. The French remained on the defensive.¹⁰

In September, with Pitt and Anson admitting that 1757 had been an ‘inactive and unhappy campaign’, thoughts moved ahead to the next campaigning season. While Holburne was to send his most heavily damaged ships back to England, he was ordered to winter eight ships of the line at Halifax ensuring they were in theatre for an early start in 1758. Halifax was an essential element to a sustained naval presence in North American waters intended to prevent the French assembling such a naval force again. In comparison, unable to sustain his ships in North American waters and having achieved his object, de la Motte sailed for France on 30 October, evaded the Western Squadron for a second time, and made it into Brest on 23 November. While there had been no naval action, de la Motte had achieved his strategic object of deterring the attack on Louisbourg. The events of 1757 again illustrated the basic fact that conducting war at and from the sea inherently linked together events in Europe and North America. The French had achieved success by mobilising naval forces from Toulon and Brest, but their main problem was that achieving local superiority to deter the British was not sustainable.¹¹

The British campaign of 1758

By the end of 1757 Pitt was determined to begin the conquest of Canada. As early as Christmas of 1755 he was convinced that North America was where ‘England and Europe were to be fought for’. The question was which invasion route to choose? French naval control of Lake Ontario and their possession of Fort Frontenac prevented the British transiting down the St Lawrence. Attacking via Lake Champlain would involve reducing a number of French forts, a time-consuming process. The third option was to have another crack at Louisbourg, then sail up the St Lawrence to capture Quebec. Loudon was resolved to try all three, as was Pitt. The difference now was that Pitt was prepared to throw sufficient resources at all three parts of the plan, in particular the expedition to Louisbourg.¹²

The Louisbourg expedition of 1758 would benefit from lessons learned from the North American and European failures of 1757. Strategic planning began early, in August 1757, with the Secret Committee of the Privy Council meeting again in September and the key decisions made by Christmas. This allowed the development of a coherent joint operational plan, based around navy–army cooperation. To ensure overwhelming force the three-pronged expedition would be the largest ever mounted. The Louisbourg force would consist of 14,215 men, including 14 regular battalions and a siege train. It would also be well led under the overall commander of Colonel (but holding the temporary rank of Major General in America) Jeffrey Amherst. Major General James Abercromby would lead 25,000 regulars and provincials in an attack on Fort Carillion to threaten the French position in Canada. A third force under Colonel John Forbes would have 7,000 regulars and provincials to take Fort Duquesne. In total the British plans called for the coordination of nearly 50,000 men.¹³

Faced with a continental war, Versailles was focusing on army operations in Hanover and keeping its naval forces in being for a possible invasion of the British Isles, while trying to protect its West Indian possessions. Nevertheless, in home waters the Royal Navy's Western Squadron would strive to achieve local superiority by dissuading the French from sailing from Brest and other Atlantic ports, and the Mediterranean fleet would prevent the French Toulon fleet exiting the Gut. Finally, Pitt would ensure that naval resources in North America were sufficient to guarantee superiority there. Although appearing as three separate naval deployments, all were actually part of the one, overarching plan. On 5 January 16 ships of the line along with frigates and smaller vessels were ordered to be made ready for North American service under Admiral Boscawen.¹⁴

Abercromby's attack on Fort Ticonderoga began in early July when 900 *bateaux* and 135 whaleboats carrying 6,000 regular and 6,000 provincial soldiers took to Lake George. The flotilla landed the troops on the northern shore on 6 July and on 8 July Abercromby tried to invest the fort, but with intelligence suggesting the French defences were weaker than they at first appeared, he determined to storm it. The result was a bloodbath as British and provincial regiments threw themselves at the defences to no avail. British casualties numbered nearly 2,000; the French

lost 554 out of 4,236. Abercromby withdrew and the recriminations started. The failure did give an opportunity for General Broadstreet, with consent from Abercromby, to attack Fort Frontenac with 3,100 men. Arriving at Frontenac on 25 August Broadstreet caught the French by surprise and after a bombardment on the morning of 27 August the fort surrendered. The British seized a huge quantity of stores and goods, took two French ships and burned seven others. Before leaving they raised the fort to the ground, 'New France's Lake Ontario navy and its base was wiped out'.¹⁵

Forbes' expedition required vital military supplies to be shipped from England to Philadelphia. Stores were essential, for Forbes would have to cut a road through 100 miles of wooded and mountainous country between Raystown and Fort Duquesne itself. The route took the French somewhat by surprise and with a sickly and outnumbered garrison the Fort's commander evacuated it on 23 November. Two days later Forbes' expedition took possession of the site, renaming it Pittsburgh. Once again, the shipping capacity of the British merchant marine combined with the extant maritime security provided by the Royal Navy allowed the British government to conduct transatlantic campaigns far inland in North America.¹⁶

The most important of the three expeditions, given the domestic political background, was Amherst's against Louisbourg, and the planning for it was careful and meticulous. In December 1757, 43 transport ships were hired in Britain and sent across the Atlantic to assemble at New York, ready to ship 9,000 men to join with the 2,000 men already at Halifax. At home a further 22 transports were assembled to ship 2,500 men and supplies across the Atlantic. Boscawen detached some of his ships of the line on various escort duties to provide security to troopships and ordnance vessels heading for Halifax; it was planned that they would arrive safely before the main fleet under Boscawen. On 21 January Boscawen sent his second in command, Sir Charles Hardy, ahead in the 64-gun *Captain* to implement an early blockade of Louisbourg. Boscawen sailed with nine ships of the line and 12 frigates on 23 February, but the 74-gun *Invincible* was wrecked off St Helens. The Admiralty replaced her with the *Dublin*, which would sail on 15 March and also transport General Amherst. Anson's intent was to ensure that Boscawen's force, when added

to the ships at Halifax under Commodore Alexander Colville, totalled 21 ships of the line, giving him a slight numerical superiority over the force the French were expected to try to assemble at Louisbourg. Anson hoped Boscowen would be stationed off Louisbourg by the end of March.¹⁷

As well as using the Western Squadron to create secure conditions for shipping troops to North America, the implementation required access to shipping resources. Not only did a prosperous maritime economy provide the finance to support allies and pay for British military expenditure, it also placed transport ships at the disposal of the British government. In comparison the French, without access to the shipping tonnage they required to move troops across the Atlantic, often resorted to arming warships *en-flûte* (removing a proportion of their heavy guns to make space for troops and supplies) which downgraded their fighting ability and was inherently risky. For the British hiring transport tonnage was a considerable outlay, costing £667,771 in 1758 which was 17.5 per cent of the entire naval budget of £3,803,000. Crucial was the capacity of the British merchant marine to have enough ships to complete normal trading voyages and thereby provide revenue but also to have capacity for short-term hire by the government. For expeditions leaving the British Isles transports were hired in home waters, but for troop movements in North America agents were appointed to hire local ships for service. As with supplies, victuals and manpower, the mobilisation and transport of imperial resources allowed Britain to fight the war in North America from a more advantageous position than the French.¹⁸

A final factor for the conduct of the British operation against Louisbourg was the development of Halifax as an in-theatre naval base essential for the projection of maritime power. Colville had assumed command at Halifax in 1757 and his task was to ready for service the seven ships of the line, a 50-gun ship and two frigates that had wintered there between 1757 and 1758. The facilities at Halifax were still in their infancy and Colville found shortages of spars, sailcloth and clothing. Again, it was the mobilisation of imperial resources that was crucial. The lack of sufficient skilled manpower was solved when Colville shipped across shipwrights from Boston in January 1758. In April 1758 a vital shipment of canvas and other naval stores arrived from New York. Further naval stores had been shipped out from England. When Admiral

Hardy arrived on 19 March Colville's squadron was just about ready for service.¹⁹

Even better was the news that Colville had managed to get the schooner *Monckton* to sea in February followed by the 14-gun sloop *Hawke* in March. Their job was to gather intelligence from Louisbourg and intercept French merchantmen. By the time that Hardy in the 64-gun *Captain* arrived Colville also had the 50-gun *Sutherland* at sea. But operating a close watch off Louisbourg in the early months of 1758 stretched the Royal Navy to its limits. In freezing temperatures with sea ice, sailors suffered from frostbite, exposure and scurvy while rigging and sails froze. Fog and snowstorms reduced visibility so much it 'prevented our seeing any objects at the distance of our ship's length'. In such conditions, on 6 April Hardy sailed from Halifax to commence his blockade of Louisbourg with seven ships of the line. Wintering the ships in Halifax, obtaining necessary supplies for sea service and then operating them off Louisbourg during the early months was a major logistical achievement and fulfilled Pitt's policy of having a squadron off the French city early in the year.²⁰

The blockade

A typhus epidemic brought to Brest by de la Motte's ships in late 1757 was finally diminishing, but the French navy was still suffering from sickness well into 1758. Overall, the French lost at least 8,500 sailors during 1757 to add to their losses in 1755 and 1756; by 1758 there were only enough seamen to man 25 ships of the line. Despite these constraints, Versailles understood the need to do something to save Louisbourg once more. In the Mediterranean, Osborn's victory at Cartagena on 28 February, fought when Boscawen was just to the west of Finisterre, and his subsequent blockade of enemy warships ensured that there would be no French assistance from that quarter. In the Channel, Hawke's Western Squadron had also sailed shortly after Boscawen on a month-long cruise to secure naval superiority in the Channel and bottle up the European end of the transatlantic sea line of communication. A French fleet had sailed in February but some ships had been forced back by gales. The 74-gun *Magnifique* did make the transatlantic crossing but found pack ice at

Louisbourg. Losing 120 men to hypothermia, *Magnifique* headed back to Europe making landfall at Corunna, Spain and not reaching Brest until November having lost half her crew on the fruitless voyage. Hawke's mauling of the relief convoy in Basque Roads in April denied the defenders of Louisbourg much-needed provisions, stores and reinforcements as well as the naval force assigned to escort the merchant ships across the Atlantic.²¹

The French did, however, succeed in getting some ships to sea using their now preferred method of sailing singly or in small groups. Admiral des Gouttes sailed in the 74-gun *Prudent* on 9 March and was followed by the 74-gun *Entreprenant* and three 64-gun ships armed *en-flûte* with a single frigate, this force also carried an infantry battalion. Evading Hawke, *Prudent* arrived in North America and, in difficult weather conditions, the 22-gun *Chèvre* slipped past Hardy on 24 April. In April, Hardy intercepted six French merchantmen, and on 26 April his *Captain* took the French 36-gun frigate *Diane*, but on the same day Admiral Beaussier's 74-gun *Entreprenant*, with two 64s and a 32-gun frigate, slipped past the blockade. A further 64-gun ship made it into Louisbourg during May, but it was not enough. With Hawke interdicting French merchantmen in home waters and Hardy in North America, Louisbourg was already running out of food. Captures declined during May, but with the weather clearing and reinforcements arriving from Boscawen's fleet, Hardy could tighten the blockade. His presence off Louisbourg was yet to have its greatest effect.²²

Admiral Chaffault's two ships of the line and four ships *en-flûte* carrying an infantry battalion and stores had sailed on 2 May from Basque Roads and arrived off Louisbourg on 29 May. Hardy's presence stopped Chaffault adding his ships of the line to the defence of the town, instead Chaffault landed his 700 men 50 miles from Louisbourg before taking his ships to Quebec. The French naval force at Louisbourg, so essential for protecting the town's vulnerable harbour, was only five ships of the line and three frigates with reduced armaments and with many sailors ashore sick. Between November 1757 and June 1758 the French tried to send at least 19 convoys across the Atlantic with the main effort occurring during March to May 1758. Thanks to the combined efforts of Hawke, Osborn and Hardy, only five made it without loss and five convoys did not get a

single ship to Louisbourg or Quebec. The chances of making it past Hawke, Colville and Hardy and the weather were fifty-fifty at best. Some lost their escorts, such as when the 70-gun *Dorsetshire* took the 64-gun *Raisonnable* on 29 May; *Raisonnable*'s two merchantmen carrying food for the town did not make it across.²³

The attack on Louisbourg

After a tortuous Atlantic crossing Boscawen arrived at Halifax, with his fleet benefitting from an almost clean bill of health, on 9 May. He now had 21 ships of the line and 14 50 gun-ships and frigates, at his disposal. More than half of his ships were less than ten years old. Ashore and cooped up in transports were 9,500 soldiers, with the balance of the land force still in transit. Pitt had given Boscawen and Amherst's subordinates orders to commence operations without Amherst, of whom there was still no sign. Boscawen was keen to get started.²⁴

Boscawen's instructions of 21 January made it clear that 'the success of this expedition will very much depend upon an entire good understanding between our Sea and Land Officers'. He was to 'maintain and cultivate such a good understanding and agreement, and to order the Sailors, and

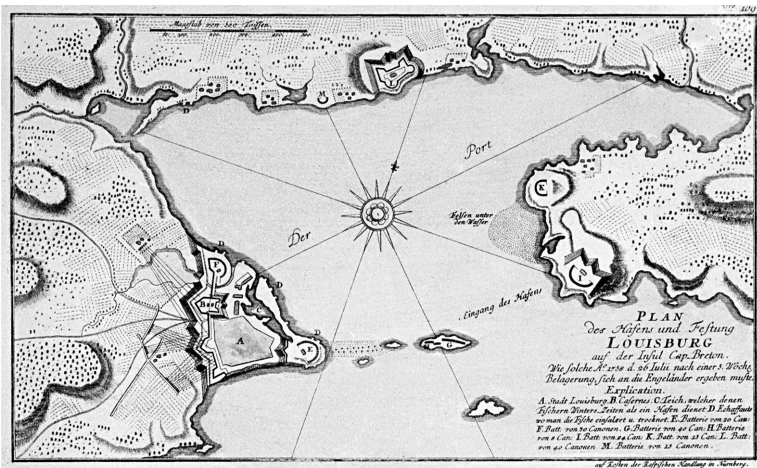


Fig. 5.2. The fortress city of Louisbourg and the inner harbour

Marines, under your command, to assist our Land Forces'. Councils of war were to be composed of four officers from each service. The same intent had been communicated to Amherst, including instructing him to spare soldiers to help man ships of the fleet if that were required. Both Boscawen and Amherst were ordered to maintain command transparency by sharing their respective orders with each other. It helped that the planning for Louisbourg coincided with the army inquiry into the failure at Rochefort. The main outcome was to establish responsibilities during amphibious operations, with the army and navy commanders agreeing on the landing site; the navy would then conduct the landing whence, once established ashore, the army would assume command of its forces; the fleet would then play a supporting role, landing marines and seamen to fulfil a myriad of tasks including hauling guns and stores and manning batteries.²⁵

Boscawen more than fulfilled the spirit of these orders by forming a joint navy–army planning staff, a novel process at the time and clearly inspired by his own experience of amphibious operations and the problems at Rochefort. While it was desirable to use specialist flat-bottomed landing craft developed following Rochefort, Boscawen's ships had sailed before being equipped with them. Instead ship's boats, along with locally sourced fishing boats, whale boats and shallow draught *bateaux* would be used. They were organised into divisions and carried pennants for identification. As well as developing a joint plan, soldiers undertook extra training ashore and in the skills necessary for an amphibious assault such as transferring from ships to smaller boats. Crucially, the planning and training process was reflective, with lessons identified, learned and incorporated into the plan after each exercise. Boscawen was ready to sail, but delayed by contrary winds took the opportunity of a second major practice on 25 May when 5,700 soldiers were landed in one assault wave. On 28 May, with the wind having shifted, Boscawen's flagship *Namur* weighed anchor and – with seven other ships of the line, two 50s, and frigates and sloops convoying 143 transports – set sail for Louisbourg.²⁶

Off Halifax Boscawen's fleet encountered the *Dublin* and Amherst joined the Admiral on the *Namur*, making considerable changes to the landing plan. By the morning of 2 June the fleet was anchored in Gabarus

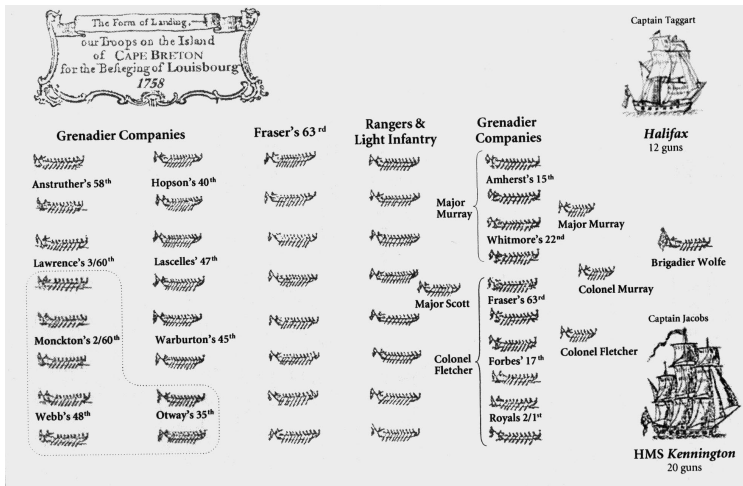


Fig. 5.3. Wolfe's order of Landing for 8 June 1758

Bay, a somewhat exposed location to the west of Louisbourg. An attempted landing on 6 June was aborted with the surf too dangerous. Two days later the soldiers were in their boats again and, after a naval reconnaissance, the order was given for the landing to commence. The French had been unaware of the fleet's presence and only now did shore batteries open up on the flotilla. In the surf boats began to sheer off target and at one point Colonel James Wolfe tried to call off the landing, but a number of boats guided by Lieutenants Atkins and Smith made landfall at a small cove and cleared a French battery covering the main landing area. From then on the rest of the British force could land and by 06:00 Amherst and Boscawen were ashore before the latter returned to the *Namur*. At 08:00 the British assault force was on the move inland for the loss of just 38 men drowned or killed in their boats and eight more killed ashore with a further 61 wounded. Naval losses were seven dead and 52 wounded. The navy now moved to its role of supporting the operations of the army ashore.²⁷

For Amherst, naturally cautious, this would involve a lengthy siege of Louisbourg with a number of French outlying positions to be dealt with first while a road was constructed from the beaches to the siege lines. The French warships were at anchor in the harbour, their presence the only safeguard from a sea-based assault on a city which had no harbour

defences. On 19 June, Amherst's siege guns opened fire on the French warships forcing them further to the west and leaving the harbour open and the land-based outer fortifications unprotected from the sea. Their retreat allowed siege lines and batteries to be constructed without too much interference from the French. With British batteries encroaching, the French sailors were landed to bolster the shore defences. Two French frigates did manage to sail and evade Hardy's blockade.

Meanwhile Boscawen's fleet landed ships guns for the batteries, supplies, powder and food, with ships carpenters sent ashore to build storehouses and a hospital while sailors hauled guns and supplies into the front lines. The navy's guns combined with the sailor's expertise and muscle meant that Amherst could unleash a terrible bombardment on 16 July. Naval 24pdr and 32pdr guns were landed, along with powder and 300–500 shot for each gun. In order to build additional batteries Boscawen landed over 400 sailors each night. Of particular utility were 188 Cornishmen, former tin miners, and now sailors in the fleet who were employed in digging mine galleries under Louisbourg's defences. As Colonel Wolfe remarked, Boscawen:

has given all and even more than we could ask of him. He has furnished arms and ammunition, pioneers, sappers, miners, gunners, carpenters, and boats and is, I must confess, no bad *fantassin* [soldier] himself, and an excellent back-hand at a siege.²⁸

On 21 July a British shell ignited charges on the 64-gun *Célèbre* and the conflagration spread to the *Entreprenant* and then *Capriceux*; all were burned to the waterline. That left the *Prudent* and *Bienfaisant*, which Boscawen was determined to cut out and bring matters to a head. Under the command of Captains Laforey and Balfour, 51 ship's boats, with oars muffled and carrying 600 sailors and marines, stormed both ships – in a matter of minutes they were in British hands. *Prudent* ran aground and was burned; *Bienfaisant* however would be taken into the Royal Navy. In total seven British sailors were killed and nine wounded. This loss was the final blow. At 10:00 on 26 July the French raised a flag of truce and began the process of agreeing the terms of capitulation, next day the Union Flag was flying over Louisbourg. In trying to save the city a second time, taking into



Fig. 5.4. The burning of the *Prudent* and the taking of the *Bienfaisant* in Louisbourg harbour, 1758

account the ships lost in European and North American waters, the French ‘lost a quarter of their navy trying to hold Louisbourg in 1758’. Its fall left the way open for the attack on Quebec, but given the time of the year Boscawen thought the risks too great for the naval force. That would have to wait until 1759.²⁹

Britain resurgent and France in crisis

For a war which began with the failures of 1756 and 1757, by the end of 1758 things were definitely looking better for Britain and the Royal Navy. Warships that had been ordered in preparation for war in 1755 were coming into service. That required increases in manpower, but the manning crises experienced during 1755–6 were far less acute as merchant sailors were incorporated into the Royal Navy while unskilled sailors were benefitting from two to three years’ sea service and skill acquisition. The Royal Navy was protecting British trade at sea which was expanding to provide the financial underpinning for British grand strategy.³⁰

For Versailles, however, the initial successes of the war were fading fast. The French had eschewed convoy during the early stages of the war for the very sensible reason that they attracted attention and if found were vulnerable to attack by a superior naval power, but in 1757 the French lost 390 merchant ships. By 1758 the French West Indian trade had fallen to less than a quarter of peacetime levels, and would continue to fall until the end of the war. The value of trade in Bordeaux was around 30 million livres in peacetime; it had fallen to 8 million livres by 1758 while La Rochelle virtually ceased to trade. Overall, British attacks ensured that by as early as 1758 French merchantmen had been wiped from the seas.³¹

In response the French turned to neutral ships to carry their cargoes. This was a particular problem for Britain in the West Indies, where Dutch and Danish vessels carried out stores and shipped home French West Indian sugar and coffee. The Danes also shipped goods to France from the Baltic, especially naval stores. In order to stop France exploiting this loophole, Britain exploited its own loophole. In time of peace the French denied foreign ships access to the North American and West Indian markets to stimulate French merchant shipping. If foreigners were denied in peace then they should not be allowed access in time of war; this concept was implemented as the 'Rule of 1756', whereby neutral merchant ships trading with ports normally closed to them in peacetime were treated as legitimate prizes by the Royal Navy and privateers. A second loophole – shipping French trade to Dutch and Danish colonies before reshipment as foreign trade – was closed with the concept of 'continuous voyage' which, while treating the ships as neutrals, classified the goods as enemy trade and allowed for their seizure. Neutral ships were stopped and searched; if carrying French trade it was confiscated and the ship allowed to continue.³²

With the loopholes closed French trade continued to suffer, insurance rates were in excess of 50 per cent by 1758 and the cost of freight rocketed from the 1756 rate of 190 livres per ton to a peak of 1,000 livres per ton in 1758–9. The destruction of French overseas trade devastated state finances and naval resources, especially once imports of naval stores dried up and the supply of experienced seamen became exhausted. In September 1758 the French Foreign Minister Bernis wrote:

our navy is gone; and so, if we wish to support the maritime war, it will be necessary to give up the other war totally. The navy owes one hundred million. There are no more sailors in the kingdom.

His pessimism led to his replacement by the Duc de Choiseul in December 1758, but the fact remained that while the war with Britain might be unwinnable it was crucial for French reputation to continue to support their Austrian allies. Before taking up his post as foreign minister, Choiseul had written that France could simply not 'give up two hundred millions which her maritime commerce had provided France, which allowed her to maintain a great army and to pay subsidies to her allies'. Clearly, the Royal Navy, and to a lesser degree British privateers, put France in an intolerable position by destroying French overseas trade. That was making it impossible for France to fund her navy, army and allies, impacting upon the French ability to wage war in Europe.³³

In all this it was the Royal Navy's Western Squadron that was the 'linchpin': protecting British ships and commerce, thereby freeing up British cruisers to attack French cruisers, privateers and merchant ships. French overseas trade, which Choiseul understood was the lifeblood of the French war effort, had been devastated. This had the added benefit for Britain of also destroying the French pool of experienced seamen, thereby exacerbating French manning problems. It also prevented the French from obtaining key naval stores, which impacted upon shipbuilding. The Royal Navy also ensured that connections between France and Canada, already under severe strain, might be completely severed, allowing Britain freedom of action in the theatre Pitt considered the most important. All this made existing trade ever more vulnerable and depleted French financial, human and material resources, widening the gap between British seapower and French capabilities – and so on in an ever decreasing circle that Versailles could simply not break. By the end of 1758, unless France could gamble on delivering a decisive blow to force Britain to the peace table in the next campaigning season, the war was already all but lost for Versailles.³⁴

CHAPTER 6

‘Our bells are worn threadbare with ringing for victories’

The *Annus Mirabilis*, Part 1: Lagos Bay and Quebec

British efforts in 1759 had three main objects. The first two were essentially defensive – the security of Hanover and the British mainland – and were based upon the assumption that the French would try something in Europe to balance against their losses overseas. The third was more aggressive in nature: the conquest of Quebec. The Royal Navy was integral directly to both the second and third objects and indirectly to the defence of Hanover. By the start of 1759 the Royal Navy could call upon 275 ships in commission manned by over 70,000 men. More ships would come into commission during the year with further increases in manpower. The crucial outcome of this process was that from 1759 onwards, with declining French naval effectiveness, not only could deployments in North America, the West Indies and East Indies be sustained, they could be sustained and even widened on a scale hitherto unknown. The full benefit of the naval situation would be felt in home waters, which in itself would affect the global conflict.¹

The French invasion threat

By the beginning of 1759 Versailles was aware that France was losing the war against Britain. Heavy borrowing, a loss of trade revenues and colonies, increased military and naval expenditure, plus subsidies to allies had left French finances in a shocking state; France looked like a bad

investment. What was needed was a quick decisive blow to force Britain to the peace table. That would involve either taking Hanover or, more preferably, an invasion of the British Isles. The plan was not to land and overthrow the British government, instead Choiseul's aim was to land a French army on British soil to destroy confidence in British economic strength.

For London, continuing the maritime war against France would be expensive, as would continuing to subsidise Frederick the Great of Prussia as well as paying the costs of the His Britannic Majesty's Army in Germany. Between 1756 and 1759 overall British military (army, navy, ordnance, civil governance and debt) expenditure jumped from £9,589,000 to £15,382,000. Britain could take this level of expenditure due to her creditworthiness, which allowed for long-term war borrowing at rates around 3.5 per cent. But if French troops could be landed on British or Irish soil it would, so Choiseul thought, destroy confidence and ruin Britain's creditworthiness. The rather obvious invasion preparations were part of Choiseul's thinking, for the very threat might keep British forces tied up in home defence instead of completing the conquest of Canada.²

Tentative planning for the invasion began in January 1759; by May 1759 Choiseul had settled on landing 10,000 troops on the east coast of Scotland as it might prompt Jacobites to take up arms. Time was, however, running out, and by July the invasion was set for September. In August the force was increased to 20,000 men to land near the Clyde and then to march on Edinburgh, with a *coup de main* delivered by a second force of 20,000 troops landing in Essex and marching on London. The plans completely ignored French naval weakness and relied upon the invasion flotilla avoiding the Western Squadron. The Brest fleet under Admiral Conflans would split, part of it luring Hawke away while a detachment sailed to Quiberon Bay to provide an escort for the troops and transports assembling there. But Conflans fleet was still suffering from the typhus epidemic of 1757–8, and a lack of sufficiently skilled seamen meant that Conflans had to utilise unskilled labour. Despite these problems, by 30 May he had scabbled enough men together to move 21 ships of the line out of Brest harbour. There he found a superior Royal Navy fleet.³

The fundamental problem for the French was trying to launch an invasion across an uncommanded sea. To provide naval protection for the invasion force Choiseul came up with a complex scheme. Recognising it was unwise to try and bring the Brest fleet into the Channel, it could instead decoy the Western Squadron away from the invasion flotilla which might sail with just a light escort, perhaps six ships of the line, with a few frigates and corvettes. The Mediterranean fleet under de la Clue might also play a role – if moved to Cadiz it could threaten to move up to the Morbihan, or if sent across the Atlantic it might even draw Royal Naval forces away to the West Indies. Conflans might even lure Hawke away completely while the invasion convoy with its light screen went about its business.⁴

Well aware what was afoot at Brest, it was not until May that the British responded, in order to avoid unnecessary wear, tear and sickness in the Western Squadron by not sending it to sea until the French were readying to sail. With intelligence noting that the French were preparing ships and stores at Brest and Lorient, the Admiralty wrote to Hawke on 18 May informing him that ‘the enemy propose to attempt an invasion, either upon Great Britain or Ireland’. The strategy for home defence in 1759 was again focused on the Western Squadron taking up its usual station off Ushant while reconnoitring the roadstead at Brest. But there was a crucial difference. In previous years the aim had been to cruise to westward to encourage the French to sail, as both Hawke and Anson knew the best way to deal with the Brest fleet was at sea where it could be destroyed once and for all. Now, with the British Isles under threat, what was needed was a tighter, close blockade of Brest. Hawke’s object was to stop an invasion, not destroy a French fleet. Hawke was instructed to cruise off Brest for two weeks, before heading for Torbay to revictual with fresh provisions and await further instructions. He was, however, given full authority to remain at sea beyond the two weeks if the French preparations indicated an imminent danger. In order to prevent the French assembling at Brest, Hawke was to detach cruisers to intercept their coastal convoys.⁵

Hawke, his flag flying in the *Ramillies*, sailed on 20 May, picking up ships from Plymouth at Torbay. His aggressive intentions were made patently clear by his addition to the Admiralty’s *Printed Sailing and Fighting Instructions*, dated 14 May and sent to the captains under his command.

They were 'on no account to fire until they shall be within pistol shot', while enemy ships driven out of the line were to be pursued. It is clear that Hawke intended to close with and destroy the French fleet if he could bring them to action. With 25 ships of the line and 12 frigates Hawke arrived off Brest on 24 May. Sending a frigate to look into Brest, Hawke discovered 11 French ships of the line with four more at Lorient. He detached Keppel with five ships of the line to watch over the latter force, though Keppel found they had already made it into Brest. This allowed Hawke to concentrate upon his main object. With his smaller ships of the line and frigates deployed as his intelligence-gathering 'eyes' watching over French movements, the state of French preparations convinced Hawke that he must ignore Anson's two-week limit and use the discretionary part of his orders to remain on station. Having made this decision the weather intervened, as a severe gale blew on 6 June forcing Hawke to seek shelter in Torbay leaving the 50-gun *Rochester* and four frigates on station. The westerly gales might have driven his ships off station to avoid Brest's lee shore, but the very same gales would keep the French stuck in port.⁶

Hawke took the opportunity to revictual at Torbay from supply ships and local sources, though the request to the Exeter butcher Richard Cross to supply, at 48 hours' notice, 46,926lb of fresh beef must have caused some consternation. Hawke tried to head back to his station on 11 June but was prevented by a gale. Stuck in Torbay for two weeks, Hawke wrote to the Admiralty suggesting the logical next step in the victualling network was to use ships to revictual his fleet while on station off Ushant. Anson had tried this in 1758, with some success, but in order for Hawke to remain on station it would take a regular and concerted effort. The weather did not clear until 19 June, when Hawke sailed again for Ushant. The need to keep Hawke on station was given enhanced impetus around mid-June when intercepted French dispatches were received in London, which detailed the plan to land an army in Essex. This plan ignored a number of smaller Royal Navy deployments stationed to watch over Dunkirk and the Flemish Coast, as well as the force stationed in the Downs. A further squadron was also being prepared for service at Portsmouth. These were not battlefleets but flotilla squadrons, and would make easy work of lightly armed invasion barges and transports.⁷



Fig. 6.1. Admiral George Rodney

The Portsmouth flotilla, under the command of Admiral George Rodney in the 60-gun *Achilles*, was ready to sail on 2 July and headed for Le Havre to carry out a pre-emptive attack on the 125 French flat-bottomed invasion boats and artillery *prames* assembling there. On 3 July six bomb-vessels supported by five frigates commenced a furious bombardment, damaging French boats and magazines and setting the town on fire. Following this, Rodney remained off the port intercepting enemy merchant ships right through 1759 until January 1760. The material damage inflicted was less important than the visible show of force, which proved the Le Havre invasion flotilla could not leave port without a battlefleet. That required both de la Clue and Conflans to get out of their respective ports and escape the Western Squadron.⁸

Hawke arrived back on station on 20 June and implemented the closest blockade of Brest yet attempted. His method was to 'keep them constantly in view, so as either to prevent their coming out or doing my utmost, in case they should, to take or destroy them'. Hawke's close blockade comprised an inshore squadron under Captain Augustus Hervey

to watch over the three passages into and out of Brest, while Hawke kept the battlefleet to the west but within signalling range of Hervey. Now Brest was 'blocked up in the strictest sense', with coastal convoys and neutral vessels prevented from entering or leaving. With Hawke in control of the approaches to Brest, what was needed was to keep him there. Hawke had thought his cruise would be a long one, and on 3 July informed the Admiralty that he would be sending two ships every fortnight to Plymouth for cleaning. This would not be sufficient, and the subject was discussed at the highest levels of government in mid-July. The plan was to rotate six ships of the line at a time to be sent for cleaning, refitting and revictualling. The effort would be considerable, but by 1759 there were the ships available, and it would certainly be expensive, but strategically it was absolutely worth it. Here the dockyard capacity of Plymouth was important as Portsmouth was too far to the east. During the Seven Years War Plymouth Royal Dockyard possessed a single and a double dock, but the process of cleaning ships there did take some time. The bigger problem for Hawke was that it was labour intensive for his crews and would not provide much-needed refreshment. To save them time and energy Hawke instructed ships to be cleaned without entering the dry docks; instead they would be hauled on to their sides in shallow water and scraped clean – a process which would only take ten days. By August 1759 Hawke had under his command 32 ships of the line. With the French having now collected 22 ships of the line at Brest, this number allowed Hawke to rotate ships if he wished and make detachments while maintaining a numerical superiority over the French.⁹

At the start of the Seven Years War naval opinion from men like Hawke, Anson and Boscawen was that the Western Squadron could maintain itself at sea for around four weeks before sickness set in. The operational window for the Western Squadron was therefore limited and contributed to the policy of basing it in port and responding to intelligence of the French sailing. Hawke himself thought that the biggest issue for his fleet was that 'the relief of the squadron depends more on the refreshment of the ships' companies than in cleaning the ships'. While ships always obtained fresh provisions as and where they could, what was needed was an organisational solution to feed the entire Western Squadron on station, which would require provisions to be shipped out.¹⁰

On 23 July 1759 Hawke requested that fresh cattle be sent out to him, lamenting that he had not yet received supplies from Plymouth and recommending the appointment of a commanding officer there to take charge of the arrangements. His ships' crews were starting to become sickly, with the *Hercules* already sent into port for refreshment. In fact the Admiralty had already instructed fresh cattle to be collected and shipped out with the first victualling convoy of 21 ships arriving with Hawke on 24 July. Hawke, though, complained about the quality: 'The beer brewed at your port is so excessively bad' while the bread being 'so full of weavils and maggots, it would have infected all the bread come on board this day'. Bread and beer were staples of the sailors' diet, and poor victuals not only impacted upon morale but running out of beer was dangerous. At sea beer remained drinkable longer than water, and hence in home waters it was the sailor's major medium for taking on water as well as an important source of calories for a labour-intensive workforce.¹¹

On 2 August Hawke wrote to the Plymouth victualling agent John Ommanney instructing him to arrange a weekly delivery of cattle and sheep. The same day the Admiralty was instructing the Victualling Board to provide Hawke with fresh provisions from Spithead in addition to those from Plymouth, in particular beer would now come from London and Portsmouth. Nevertheless, the scale of the victualling operation was increasing beyond Ommanney's capacity. On 6 August Robert Pett, a victualling commissioner, was sent to investigate the problems at Plymouth and to stay and oversee the logistical challenge. Finally, on 25 August, Captain Thomas Hanway was appointed commanding officer at Plymouth. On 14 August Hawke received cattle, beer and, on the initiative of Pett, cabbages, turnips, carrots, potatoes and onions. On 20 August a sloop was designated to shuttle fresh fruit and vegetables to Hawke. In late August Pett sent him a convoy of 22 victuallers and the system continued for the duration of Hawke's blockade. It says much for the victualling system implemented between 1758 and 1759 that the naval surgeon, James Lind, appointed to Haslar Hospital by Anson in 1758 and who had worked on the problem of scurvy, thought that by 1759 the Western Squadron, despite being at sea for six or seven months, enjoyed 'a better state of health [...] than it can well be imagined so great a number of people would enjoy, on the most healthful spot of ground in

the world'. This was no mean feat; the 14,000 men needed to crew Hawke's ships was larger than the population of most English towns at the time. In November the Western Squadron's sick list numbered fewer than 20 men.¹²

The whole rationale behind the Western Squadron's deployment for 1759 was to keep the French battlefleet bottled up in Brest. While it was confined there would be no invasion attempt and Britain could continue its global war with relative impunity. Yet, the first blow against French naval power in 1759 did not come from Hawke, but instead from Boscawen to the south.

The Battle of Lagos Bay, 18–19 August 1759

On 28 March, Boscawen had been instructed to command the Royal Navy's fleet in the Mediterranean. His orders were to protect British trade, ensure the security of his base at Gibraltar and to annoy the enemy if he could. He arrived off Toulon in mid-May with a reinforcement of six ships of the line, assuming command from Admiral Brodrick who would remain as second in command. Boscawen had 13 ships of the line and two 50-gun ships to set up a blockade of Marseilles and Toulon. His 12 frigates were deployed as convoy escorts or on the regular trade routes. Situated so close to the French coastline Boscawen could keep up the constant threat of amphibious raids and small-scale attacks.

Boscawen, operating beyond the limits of the victualling system, could only stay on station for a few weeks before his victuals began to run out. At the end of July he headed for the Spanish coast to water, and then on to Gibraltar to pick up supplies. He arrived there on 3 August and received orders detailing intelligence of a possible French invasion attempt utilising the Toulon fleet. If de la Clue sailed for the Channel Boscawen was to follow him, but ensuring he left at least seven of the line and all his frigates in the Mediterranean. De la Clue weighed anchor and sailed from Toulon with ten sail of the line, a couple of 50-gun ships and three frigates on 5 August, heading for Cadiz. The plan was for him to keep his fleet there 'in being' to tie up Boscawen's ships and await further orders.¹³

With de la Clue now at sea, Boscawen's ships were still refitting at Gibraltar. He had stationed the 24-gun *Lyme* off Malaga and the 24-gun

Gibraltar off Cueta. On the evening of 17 August the *Gibraltar* came flying in to report the French fleet was heading for the Gut. Several of his ships were still not ready to sail including his flagship, the 90-gun *Namur*. Boscawen himself was dining with the Spanish governor of San Roque when the *Gibraltar* arrived. In a hasty but remarkable effort, at 22:00 Boscawen was on the *Namur* heading out to sea. In the rush Boscawen's fleet sailed in two distinct divisions, the *Namur* was accompanied by the 74-gun *Warspite* and *Culloden*, 70-gun *Swiftsure*, 60-gun *Intrepid* and *America* and 50-gun *Guernsey* and *Portland*. He was followed out by Brodrick in the 90-gun *Prince*, accompanied by the 80-gun *Newark*, 70-gun *Conqueror*, 64-gun *Edgar* and *St Albans* and 60-gun *Princess Louisa* and *Jersey*.¹⁴

The French fleet were ahead; de la Clue aimed to sneak past Gibraltar during the hours of darkness with lights extinguished, then rendezvous in Cadiz. Aware he was being shadowed by a frigate, he changed his plan, heading for Cape St Vincent. In the darkness the five rearmost ships of the line either did not see his signal or where de la Clue, with his poop lanterns still alight, was leading the fleet and they started to separate. Under a press of sail Boscawen's ships began to close and engaged in some long-range firing, forcing de la Clue to extinguish his remaining lanterns. Those five rearmost ships of the line and the three frigates, assuming that their Admiral would surely run for Cadiz, did just that.¹⁵

As dawn broke on 18 August, Boscawen, either unaware or ignoring the division in the French fleet, found seven enemy sail of the line to the west. De la Clue, aware his rearmost ships had separated, and with Brodrick's ships still out of sight, mistakenly assumed Boscawen's force was his missing ships and slowed to allow them to join. They were coming on under full sail, but with Brodrick's ships now starting to appear on the horizon, around 08:00 de la Clue became increasingly concerned; realising the danger he tried to flee. Boscawen signalled a general chase. The wind favoured Boscawen and de la Clue was further hampered by the poor-sailing 74-gun *Centaure*. Over several hours Boscawen closed until at 13:25 he signalled to bring on the engagement. Unsurprisingly, the first French ship brought to action was the *Centaure*, engaged by the *Culloden* around 14:30. Keen to ensure that de la Clue's van did not escape, Boscawen ordered the *America* and *Guernsey* to press on and pin it while the

heavier ships came up. As the *America*, *Portland*, *Guernsey* and *Warspite* came upon the *Centaure* and the other rearmost French ships they doubled them, firing into both sides, while Brodrick was still striving to bring his ships into the action. At 16:00 Boscawen's *Namur* entered the fray. But with his plan to stop the French van escaping going awry, he signalled to the *Intrepid* and *Warspite* to continue to push on. In fact the only ship that grasped his intent was the *Guernsey*, which had continued to sail for the van. It was left to Boscawen to lead and show what he desired, sailing on to lay the *Namur* alongside de la Clue's 80-gun *Océan* around 16:30. For half an hour or more the French flagship fought magnificently, sending over *Namur*'s mizzen mast and carrying away both her fore and main topsail yards. *Namur* fell away and ended up alongside the battered *Centaure*, which had been fired upon by every Royal Navy ship that had passed losing 200 killed and wounded before finally striking her colours.¹⁶

Centaure's sacrifice was not, at least initially, in vain, for her fight had delayed Boscawen's attempt to pin the French van. De la Clue, having fought off the *Namur*, now fled to the north-east. Boscawen was rowed to the 80-gun *Newark* and hoisted his flag to continue the pursuit. In the fading light the battle wound down with Boscawen's fleet chasing de la Clue, the *Guernsey* leading the way maintaining contact with the French fleet during the night. Under the cover of darkness and a sea haze the French *Souverain* and *Guerrier* slipped away, so that at daylight on 19 August only the *Océan*, *Redoubtable*, *Téméraire* and *Modeste* could be seen heading for Lagos Bay, Portugal. Boscawen was only three miles behind them. De la Clue was determined that his flagship should not fall into British hands and directed her to be run aground on the rocks with the *Redoubtable* following suit. The force of the impact sent *Océan*'s masts crashing down and de la Clue broke a leg. Boscawen directed Captain Kirke in the *America* to close, and after firing a few shots into her, ordered *Océan* to strike. The French flagship did so, and after removing her crew, Kirke burned the stricken warship. That was also the fate of the *Redoubtable*, also set on fire by one of Brodrick's ships. The *Téméraire* and *Modeste* had, however, anchored under Portuguese shore batteries which sent a few warning shots in the general direction of Boscawen's fleet. Portugal was a friend to England and there was little further interference



Fig. 6.2. Boscawen's victory at the Battle of Lagos, 18 August 1759

as Boscawen ignored neutrality and sent in the *Warspite* to take possession of the *Téméraire*. *Modeste* was also captured.¹⁷

For 56 men killed and 196 wounded Boscawen had taken or destroyed five French ships of the line. This was, by any stretch, a major tactical and operational victory worth celebrating, but his post-battle dispatch reveals some consternation at the French ships that had got away: 'It is well but it might have been a great deal better.' Boscawen was left to ponder where they had gone. Preparing to sail for England, as per instructions to bring some of the fleet home to help defend against invasion, he wrote to Hawke hoping that the Western Squadron might meet them further north, but the *Souverain* and *Guerrier*, which had escaped during the night, reached Rochefort. Boscawen left Brodrick with seven ships of the line to blockade Cadiz, where of course unbeknownst were eight French ships of the line, and took the rest of the British ships and the three prizes home.¹⁸

The victory lifted British spirits. Moreover, the eight enemy ships of the line blockaded in Cadiz remained there until January 1760 when they returned to Toulon. They could not play a role in the 1759 invasion plan nor fulfil the prime object of de la Clue's fleet which,



Fig. 6.3. Boscawen's victory removed the threat from de la Clue's fleet

by August 1759, was increasingly likely to involve sailing for the West Indies to save Martinique. Boscawen's victory had, therefore, strategic implications both in Europe and the Caribbean. The victory also freed up six British ships of the line for deployment elsewhere, and added three French ships to the Royal Navy, again increasing the naval disparity.¹⁹

The attack on Quebec

Preventing French ships from leaving European waters was crucial for the 1759 campaign in North America. With the reduction of French positions on the lakes in 1758, Quebec became ever more dependent upon its transatlantic supply route from France. But given the Royal Navy's superiority in home and North American waters Versailles understood transatlantic resupply was increasingly risky. The doomed effort to try and resupply Louisbourg in 1758 stood as a recent and stark example. Nevertheless, with an eye on future peace talks, if France retained even a foothold in Canada it would count in the inevitable territorial exchanges. That, thought Montcalm, was a distinct possibility given his belief that

British ships of the line could not navigate the 420 miles of the St Lawrence river to reach Quebec.²⁰

For the British there were still French positions to deal with on the Great Lakes, and once again operations there would form just part of a wider plan to assert control over North America. Ordered to assault Canada from the south, Amherst decided to attack Fort Niagara. Troops, equipment and artillery were again shipped up the Mohawk river to Oswego then west along Lake Ontario. The French had two warships on the lake but they failed to spot the British flotilla. While the garrison left behind at Oswego were beating off a counterattack, Fort Niagara was invested and capitulated on 25 July. Amherst, with the main body of his force, sailed up Lake George to assault Fort Carillon. Taken by surprise the French tried to evacuate on 26 July. When Amherst took possession he renamed it Fort Ticonderoga. Not satisfied, his force sailed for Crown Point, landing unopposed on 4 August to find the French had retired 80 miles up Lake Champlain to Île aux Noix. To push further ships and heavier artillery would be needed.²¹

Amherst sent for Captain Joshua Loring, who had been in charge of the transports at Boston and was now tasked with commanding shipwrights and seamen transferred from the Atlantic coast inland to the lakes. Loring had been busy during 1758 building warships on Lake George. Now he was busy building a brig at Ticonderoga. Amherst instructed him to build a sloop to match a French warship then under construction. Given the pressure on wood supplies for repairing the defences at Ticonderoga and building *bateaux* for transports, building the warships took some time. Finally, on 10 October, the 20-gun *Duke of Cumberland* brig was added to Amherst's little navy of the 7-gun *Ligonier* and 16-gun *Boscawen*. With a paucity of experienced seamen and naval officers, army officers were given naval commissions, Lieutenant Alexander Grant of the 77th Regiment of Foot taking command of the *Boscawen*, while rank and file served as seamen. While working his way up the lake the weather broke, and with his men starting to freeze, on 18 October Amherst called off the expedition. Once again access to the lakes and river systems had been vital to project power in the American interior. Where that access was contested, warships were needed – and that required naval experience and a high degree of cooperation between the army and navy.²²

With Pitt keen for Amherst to exercise power as the commander in chief for North America at New York, the task of taking Quebec would fall to Major General James Wolfe, whose experience of Rochefort and Louisbourg would prove useful in another amphibious operation. Preparations were thorough and began early. Once Pitt knew Quebec was out of reach in 1758 he had started planning for the next campaign season. By December 1758 Wolfe was aware that the object would be Quebec. With the events of 1758 displaying how beneficial it was to have a naval force operating in theatre early to pre-empt any French relief efforts, Pitt ordered ten ships of the line to winter at Halifax under the command of Rear Admiral Philip Durrell.²³

On New Year's Day 1759, the Admiralty instructed Admiral Holburne at Portsmouth 'in the most pressing manner, to get the ships ordered to be fitted for Foreign Service out to Spithead with all the expedition that is possible'. On 14 February 1759, 66 transport ships, carrying ordnance and stores, sailed under escort from England for New York. Following the reinforcements of the previous years, there were sufficient numbers of British regular forces already in North America, there was no need to ship out troops from England. The transports would allow Amherst to ship 12,000 men required from New York to be ready at Louisbourg by April for operations up the St Lawrence river. Sailing with the transports were six ships of the line and nine frigates under Rear Admiral Charles Holmes. A further ten ships of the line and three bomb-vessels followed under Vice Admiral Charles Saunders, who would command the naval part of the expedition. Saunders' flagship, the *Neptune*, also carried Wolfe, who had returned to England, back across the Atlantic. On his voyage Saunders detached two 60-gun ships of the line to reinforce Boscawen in the Mediterranean. One of them was originally to be the *Stirling Castle* but he kept her, sending a 74-gun ship instead; Saunders thought the *Stirling Castle* was particularly suited to the riverine work he envisaged for the fleet.²⁴

The major problem facing Saunders was navigating the St Lawrence; a failed British expedition in 1711 had lost eight ships and over 1,000 men. But in 1759 the navy was blessed with excellent professional navigators, of which the master of the *Pembroke*, James Cook, was just one of many with the expedition. With the value of Hardy's early blockade of Louisbourg in

mind, Anson and Wolfe thought it crucial to have a fleet upriver as soon as the ice melted. On 29 December orders sent out to Durrell instructed him, at the earliest opportunity, to sail his squadron 200 miles up the St Lawrence to the Isle of Bic. So stationed, it would command the river and prevent the French from shipping reinforcements and supplies. Once all the naval reinforcements were in theatre, Saunders would have 22 ships of the line; sufficient naval strength for the operation to commence. Once again, naval deployments in the Mediterranean, now under Boscawen, and the cruise of the Western Squadron would, it was believed, prevent the French sending ships and succour from Europe.²⁵

On 30 April, Saunders, having failed to gain entry to Louisbourg due to the pack ice, arrived at Halifax and, much to his chagrin, found Durrell still at anchor. Durrell had been ready to sail in March, but instead of following Pitt's orders to be stationed off the mouth of the St Lawrence when the ice melted to prevent the French getting reinforcements in, he had been waiting at Halifax until the ice had melted. With five ships of the line, 650 troops and a flea in his ear from Saunders to push up the St Lawrence, Durrell sailed on 5 May. He was too late, for in his absence the French had managed to sail 16 storeships from Bordeaux across the Atlantic and, having loitered off the mouth of the river for ten days until the ice melted, into Quebec. Learning of the arrival of the French resupply ships, and realising the gravity of his mistake, Durrell set about making amends. Landing the troops on the Isle aux Coudres, he pushed past an incomplete French battery and the 'traverses'. Here ships had to cross from the north navigable channel to the south channel to pass the Île d'Orleans. The French thought them impassable to ships of the line, as smaller ships required a local pilot. Durrell sent three ships of the line, including Cook's *Pembroke*, and a frigate all the way upriver to the Île d'Orleans and, utilising captured pilots, set about surveying and marking out the navigable channels with buoys. Saunders' fleet would benefit very much from this work.²⁶

In the meantime Wolfe and Saunders did not leave Halifax until 13 May, and it took until the end of the month until all the required forces were concentrated at Louisbourg. Once again the timetable was slipping as the expedition sailed on 1 June. Saunders did not reach the traverses until 25–26 June, when he found the channels buoyed and marker boats

12 July heavy artillery located in the batteries opened fire on Quebec. Montcalm showed no signs of turning from a passive defence, leaving Wolfe and Saunders to work out how to bring his numerically superior force to battle.²⁸

On 31 July, Wolfe tried landing at Montmercy Falls but was beaten off. In the meantime, on the night of 18–19 July Saunders had sent Captain Rous' 50-gun *Sutherland*, 32-gun *Diana* and 20-gun *Squirrel*, and two armed sloops and three transports carrying troops, upriver beyond Quebec. The *Diana* grounded and had to be sent to Boston for repairs. The rest of the force had glided past the French batteries, which were initially taken by surprise, but then unleashed a violent cannonade, yet only three French shots hit the ships. Once upriver the troops could reconnoitre the shore. This daring move opened up the possibility of a landing above Quebec, something the French had thought impossible; on 19 July Wolfe was with Rous on the *Sutherland* assessing potential landing sites. It also allowed the British to interdict supplies coming into Quebec from the storeships Montcalm had sent up river, thinking they would be safe. All seemed promising and plans were laid until Wolfe pulled the idea, his main concern being that the initial wave would be isolated for too long, allowing the French to defeat them in detail.²⁹

Increasingly frustrated, Wolfe began to look at sites further upriver. On 8 August a raid was launched at Point-aux-Trembles, 22 miles upriver from Quebec, but it was beaten off by the French defenders, while news of Amherst's capture of Fort Niagara led to Montcalm detaching 800 men to reinforce the French position further upriver. On 27 August, two more of Saunders' ships made it past Quebec, and by 5 September, along with the *Sutherland*, there were three frigates, a sloop and four armed vessels above the city. Wolfe, unwell and knowing his actions were bringing criticism from his subordinates, was becoming increasingly desperate for success. On 9 and 10 September he began to look at the 160 ft-high cliffs at Anse au Foulon, and noticed that a path of sorts could probably be climbed up to the top where there were perhaps only 100 French defenders. He decided on the gamble. It was at best risky, at worst a bad idea, the crucial determinant of success would be complete surprise.

Wolfe's plan called for an initial wave making the climb and defeating the French defenders to ensure the follow-on troops stood a chance of

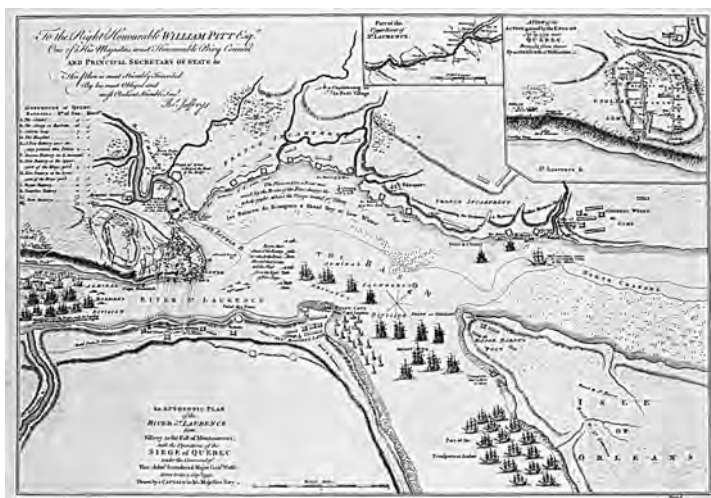


Fig. 6.5. Plan of the River St Laurence from Sillery, to the Fall of Montmorenci, with the Operations of Siege of Quebec under the Command of Vice-Admiral Saunders & Major General Wolfe down to the 5 September 1759

success. He would not, therefore, risk his whole force in one go. Helping their cause, downriver Saunders was busy making obvious preparations for a landing near Beaufort, firing broadsides against the shore. In the early hours of 13 September the first wave drifted down on the tide from their embarkation anchorage at Cape Rouge and as they approached the silhouetted cliffs in silence some boats overshot on the fast tide. A French sentry queried them, but the reply from a Highland officer that they were a provisions convoy from the French ships upriver was convincing in terms of subject and language. Making the shore, 24 men led by Colonel William Howe, started to climb the very steep and narrow path. Once he had completed the ascent Howe's small force drove off the sentries and soon 1,800 men had climbed the cliffs and more were hot on their heels. By 08:00 Wolfe had 4,500 men on the Plains of Abraham with artillery support being hauled up the cliffs by sailors from the fleet.³⁰

Montcalm had been taken completely by surprise and took some time to confirm the landing and then to concentrate his forces to mount a response. It took until 10:00 for the counterattack to materialise – a head-on assault which was rapid but ragged, and discipline began to break down. In contrast the redcoats stood in silence, muskets loaded, waiting



Fig. 6.6. A stylised view of the taking of Quebec, 13 September 1759

for the enemy to close. When they were just 40 yards away the British unleashed a devastating volley of lead, reloaded, and delivered a second volley, before charging with bayonets. The French broke. In less than quarter of an hour Montcalm's force had disintegrated. Wolfe, hit three times by enemy fire, died in his moment of victory. Montcalm was also mortally wounded. The British now prepared to besiege the city from land with, according to Brigadier Townshend, 'all the assistance the naval service can spare', as Saunders positioned his ships to bombard the town. But the defenders had had the stuffing knocked out of them. On 18 September Quebec formally capitulated.³¹

As at Louisbourg the previous year, close cooperation between the army and navy was the crucial factor, something which both commanders recognised. Townshend, now in command following the death of Wolfe, stated: 'it is my duty, short as my command has been, to acknowledge for that time how great a share the navy has had in this successful campaign.' With similar sentiments Saunders asserted that 'during the tedious campaign there had continued a perfect good understanding between the army and navy'. Close co-operation between the two had allowed Wolfe's landing and success in battle, but the long-term causation of British success

at Quebec was the strategic, operational and tactical success of the Royal Navy which created the wider context for that success.³²

The French still held Montreal, and a counterattack could not be ruled out. The job for the navy went on. Saunders sent Durrell back to England with the majority of the larger ships of the line, as they were no longer required for operations in North America. Saunders would follow, leaving Colville at Halifax with five ships of the line and a few frigates in order to support the position at Quebec early in 1760. There were of course French storeships upriver, and three French frigates, lying 60 miles above Quebec, still to deal with. They prevented supplies coming into the garrison from the interior. Quebec was garrisoned by 7,000 British troops and they, and the populace, were to endure a very hard winter. With Amherst taking time to complete his offensive down the St Lawrence, and Quebec holding out longer than anyone expected, the final conquest of Canada would have to wait for another campaigning season.³³

The fall of Quebec was a significant event in the Seven Years War. Its loss caused a financial crash for Versailles, with the government cancelling or deferring debts. Many French merchants suffered heavily: those of Le Havre lost 1.2 million livres, La Rochelle 800,000 livres. Choiseul wrote that France suffered 'a sort of bankruptcy' and called for the sale of silver and gold plate. There was also an impact on the French ability to continue the war in Germany, for the French army budget for 1760 was cut by 70 million livres – more than a third. With a fragile French public finance system incompatible with effective debt management, Versailles was not suited to a long-haul war, especially one fought on a global scale. Fundamentally, the British ability successfully to project maritime power in North America, and the West and East Indies, achieved military success with financial and political impact upon metropolitan France. British success in North America was inherently linked to the course of the war in Europe. On 16 October news of the fall of Quebec arrived in London: 'Our bells are worn threadbare with ringing for victories' wrote Horace Walpole on 21 October 1759. Pitt's conviction that North America was where 'England and Europe were to be fought for' was ringing true. London campanologists would be busy again very soon.³⁴

CHAPTER 7

‘Heart of Oak’

The *Annus Mirabilis*, Part 2: Quiberon Bay

While Wolfe and Saunders were campaigning in the St Lawrence, in European waters Hawke had continued his close blockade of Brest into the autumn of 1759. With Admiral Geary sent to watch over Rochefort, a ship of the line and frigates under Commodore John Reynolds were stationed to prevent French transports gathering in Morbihan Bay. Geary’s job was to intercept a French squadron of seven ships of the line under Admiral Bompar returning from the West Indies, but his blockade was soon called off. French Atlantic coastal waters were at best difficult, at worst dangerous, to operate in. The time spent by the Western Squadron in French coastal waters, however, now provided an opportunity to learn more about the coastline. On 27 October the Admiralty admitted that there was a general lack of knowledge about French coastal waters but from now on captains or masters would be encouraged to collect hydrographical information. Hawke’s ships had already been busy charting parts of the French coastline, adding to the navy’s knowledge, and this was essential for the continuance of the close blockade system.¹

Charting and hydrographical surveys were one way to stop boredom setting in among the crews blockading Brest. Distraction came in other ways, such as when four French ships of the line tried to escape on 21 July. The aggressive Hervey, who had been using the inshore squadron to collect intelligence, bore down on them with the 60-gun *Montagu*, 64-gun *Monmouth* and 36-gun *Pallas*. The French ships fled with one temporarily running aground. Hervey, knowing the French had advantage of tide and

wind and seeing the main fleet preparing to sail, held back from trying to cut it out and for half an hour engaged in a gunnery fight with two ships of the line, a frigate and the defensive forts. He hoped to draw out the rest of the French fleet on to Hawke's main battlefleet, but they declined the opportunity. Hervey and Hawke cannot have failed to notice the poor seamanship displayed by the French fleet; months of inaction cooped up in Brest was not only undermining French morale, it was also denigrating their sailing abilities. Hawke's fleet was also fulfilling its job of interdicting seaborne supplies, crucial given Brest's undeveloped land infrastructure. Some incoming French convoys were landing their stores at Quimper and then transporting them overland, a far lengthier process. By 10 October, Hawke could confidently assert: 'Hardly a ship has got in or out these last four month.'²

Hawke was not one to miss an opportunity to show the power and might of a Royal Navy battlefleet and from time to time he took the entire fleet towards Brest for the sailors and locals to watch fleet manoeuvres. On 27 August the fleet visibly celebrated the Allied victory over the French at Minden of 1 August; a victory which ensured Hanover would be free for another year at least. Hawke also kept up a routine of exercising the men at the 'great guns' within earshot of Brest.³

On 7 September, Hawke heard that de la Clue was at sea and was delighted on 12 September when news arrived of Boscawen's victory at Lagos Bay. On 18 September, Hawke assigned Captain Robert Duff in the *Rochester*, previously in command of the inshore squadron before Hervey took over, to take command of the frigates deployed off Quiberon Bay. Despite the time already spent at sea, Hawke could happily inform the Admiralty that 'the squadron is very healthy'. On 23 September, Duff reported that a convoy of 68 French ships had escaped from Nantes and made it into the Vannes and Auray rivers in the Gulf of Morbihan. This, combined with reports of Bompar's imminent return (he arrived at Brest on 7 November) and de la Clue's sailing, seemed to indicate that the French plans for an invasion were approaching maturity.⁴

Throughout this time both Hawke and the Admiralty expressed more concern over the transport fleet than the French battlefleet, for the latter could not fight and convoy troops at the same time, but it could prove a distraction from intercepting the invasion flotilla. Given the wear and tear

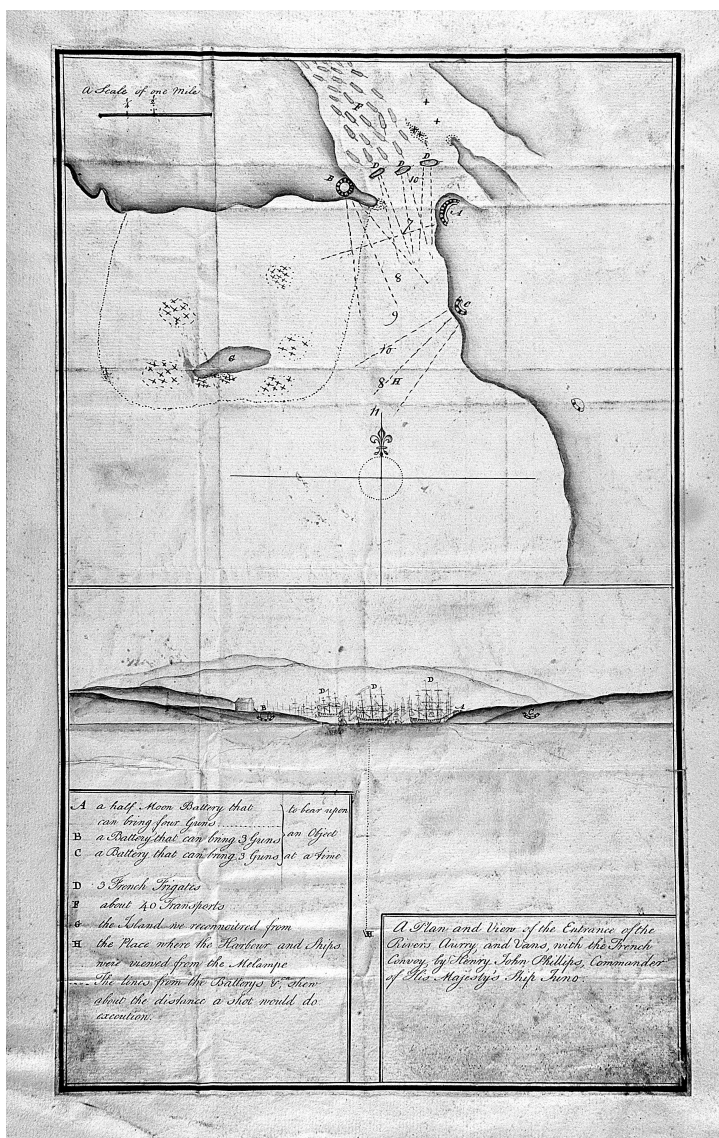


Fig. 7.1. Plan and view of Morbihan Bay 1759, showing the French transports protected by three frigates and shore batteries

of Bompar's transatlantic round trip, the Admiralty were less worried about his ships than Hawke, whom they thought had devoted too many ships to blockading Rochefort. Anson was concerned that Bompar was a distraction from the main objects, which were 'intercepting the embarkations of the enemy at Morbihan and keeping their ships of war from coming out from Brest'. By 10 October the focus was clearly on Morbihan: 'it being of the highest importance at this critical conjuncture to defeat the designs of the enemy from those ports where their preparations are very great to attempt an invasion.' Simply put, if Hawke could keep off Brest and Duff off the Morbihan there would be no invasion, but the absolute crux of the matter was to deal with the transports.⁵

Hawke wrote to Duff on 8 October confirming that the main task was now 'destroying all or part of the enemy's frigates and transports in the River Morbihan'. On board the *Achilles* were two Frenchmen, recommended by Captain Barrington, who could pilot Duff's force into the bay. Hawke ordered him to take command of the *Achilles*, then 'by every practicable means in your power, with the ships, frigates and fireships under your orders, attempt the destruction of the enemy's frigates and transports'. Hawke continued to focus his efforts on the Morbihan and when he was joined by the *Chatham* he sent it straight down to reinforce Duff who would have seven frigates under his command. He reassured the Admiralty that:

the enemy cannot stir from thence and that, should they attempt it, Captain Duff has sufficient force to destroy them in the entrance of the river, from whence such a number of ships cannot pass with safety in the face of an enemy determined to attack him.

So while the French transports were sheltered, as long as Duff remained on station he could destroy them when they were at their most vulnerable as they tried to work out of the rivers.⁶

During early October it appeared that the French Brest fleet might attempt to sail, but they still failed to come out. It was not enemy action or lack of supplies that finally drove Hawke off his station for the first time since June, but the age-old problem of wind and weather. On the evening

of 11 October a gale blew up and Hawke, keen to prevent his fleet being scattered to leeward, decided to run for Plymouth. It would not only preserve the safety of his ships but he could also pick up victuals for three months. In the violent storms, it took several days for the fleet to get into Plymouth. Once revictualled the weather subsided a little and Hawke was back out on 18 October and off Ushant the next day. All the time the weather had prevented the French getting out of Brest. With the blockade reconstituted, Hawke sent Hervey home for some much-needed rest. On 6 November, Hawke received intelligence from London that Conflans had been ordered to sail. At last it seemed that Hawke would get his chance, but again the weather intervened. Another violent gale on 7 November saw the Western Squadron running for the shelter of Torbay.⁷

The same day Hawke was driven off station Duff had put the *Achilles* in the hands of the two French pilots. They had promptly run her aground on the Gouvais Rock; Barrington was unsurprisingly apologetic for placing his faith in them. There was a vital difference in the two blockades at Brest and Morbihan which benefitted Duff when the bad weather hit. From a westerly gale the nearest safe shelter for Hawke's big ships was Torbay. On the other hand, when the gale blew up on the evening of the 11 November, Duff and Reynolds, who was now cruising off Lorient, were both able to ride out the weather in Quiberon Bay and remain on station.⁸

Intelligence from Duff indicated there were 13 regiments of infantry stationed ready to embark into the transports collected in the Morbihan. Anson's main concern was that before Hawke was back on station Conflans might slip out of Brest and destroy Duff's frigate squadron, thereby allowing the invasion transports and their troops to leave the Morbihan. Hawke was ordered to keep a cruiser stationed off Belle Isle to give early warning to Duff if Conflans did sail, and he passed these instructions on to Duff on 27 October. While stuck in Torbay, Hawke had also written to Duff suggesting he might use bomb-vessels to attack the French frigates guarding the transports.⁹

Battling against contrary winds, it was not until 14 November that Hawke could get his ships back to sea and a further three days to pass down the Channel. His flagship, the *Ramillies*, had been taking on water and Hawke had little choice but to send her to Plymouth for repairs. He

transferred his flag to the 100-gun *Royal George*. In the meantime the gale had also blown Bompar's squadron straight into Brest. Although the ships were in a poor state they brought with them experienced seamen, and Conflans persuaded sailors and officers to serve with his ships. Presuming that his jailor had sought the safety of a port, Conflans grasped the opportunity to move 21 ships of the line and five frigates out of Brest on 14 November. He then made for Quiberon Bay and the invasion flotilla. Despite a 200-mile head start, progress was slow.¹⁰

Hawke now ordered Duff to concentrate frigates outside of Quiberon Bay while watching the possible arrival of the French battlefleet. On the evening of 16 November Hawke received news from four victuallers that a British frigate, the *Juno*, had sighted the French fleet at sea to the north-west of Belle Isle and apparently heading east. They could only be heading for Quiberon Bay. Hawke had 23 ships of the line and a single frigate but was concerned about additional ships from Brest joining Conflans (and did not know about the arrival of Bompar). On 17 November he ordered Admiral Geary, then still at Plymouth, to take up station off Ushant while he chased down Conflans. On 19 November, Geary put to sea with three ships of the line and headed straight for Quiberon Bay rather than Brest.

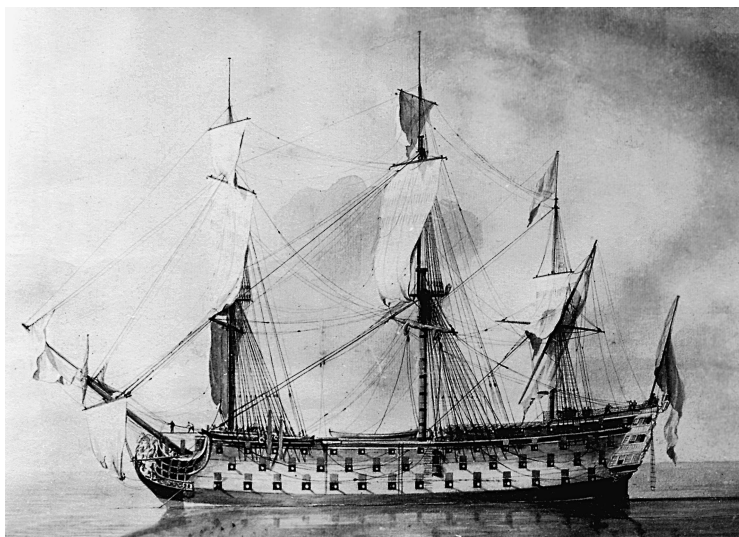


Fig. 7.2. HMS *Royal George*

That same day Admiral Saunders' fleet from Quebec had returned. Realising the gravity of the situation, he also headed to reinforce Hawke. With Conflans working eastward, on 17 November Hawke wrote: 'I have carried a pressure of sail all night, with a hard gale at south-south-east in pursuit of the enemy, and make no doubt of coming up with them either at sea or in Quiberon Bay.'¹¹

The Battle of Quiberon Bay, 20 November 1759

The chase continued as both fleets approached Belle Isle, Hawke out to the west and Conflans trying to get into the bay. On the afternoon of 19 November the wind shifted to west by south, which would allow them both to sail into Quiberon Bay. Conflans had hoped to catch Duff's frigate squadron by surprise, trap it in the bay and destroy it. Reynolds' squadron had already sailed to resume their blockade of Lorient. This was fortunate for Duff – while his frigates were taking on provisions on the afternoon of 19 November the *Vengeance* appeared from Lorient warning Duff of the imminent arrival of the French fleet. Duff cut his cables and worked his seven frigates round the northern end of Belle Isle and out to sea. On the morning of the 20th Conflans saw Duff's frigates off the north of Belle Isle and gave chase. Duff split his force, leading four frigates to the north while the other three headed south. Conflans, sensing he might be able to score a morale-boosting victory, tried to chase down both groups. Then, with his squadron still somewhat spread out came some very unwelcome news. Hot on his heels from the west was a force of more than 20 ships of the line including a number of three-deckers. It could only be Hawke.¹²

Hawke had already been reinforced by additional frigates and it was one of them, the *Maidstone*, which sighted the enemy fleet at 08:30 on 20 November. As well as his missive instructing his captains to close to pistol shot range, in July Hawke had further outlined his aggressive intent. When Hawke's flagship signalled to 'engage', he would also haul down the signal for line of battle. That would, he hoped, allow ships to continue engaging their nearest enemy until they were captured, sunk or destroyed. After that captains were to look for opportunities to assist their colleagues ahead or astern. It was a simple plan designed to bring on a close range action. As Hawke's chaplain noted, the fleet had spent six

months waiting for the opportunity to bring the French to battle – Hawke was not going to miss the chance: ‘the Admiral told his officers he was for the old way of fighting, to make downright work with them’.¹³

On the morning of 20 November, with both fleets operating off a dangerous lee shore, fleet management was complicated by a growing gale with heavy squalls from the west. Undeterred, Hawke sent Howe’s *Magnanime* ahead to maintain contact with the French, and at around 11:00 he was joined by Duff’s frigate squadron. Hawke then ordered his fleet into line abreast to concentrate his ships, but the French ‘made off’. Hawke ordered the seven ships nearest the enemy to chase them down, form line of battle and pin them while Hawke brought the rest of the fleet into action forming line of battle as they chased ‘that no time might be lost in pursuit’. Due to the pressing need to close with the French, Hawke’s fleet never did have time to form up in line abreast. In the strong wind he carried as much sail as possible to chase down Conflans; given the time of the year there would not be much daylight left for close action. ‘At ½ past 2pm’, Hawke wrote, ‘the fire beginning ahead, I made the signal for engaging’.¹⁴

Hawke was assisted by Conflans’ strict adherence to French doctrine, attempting to form his fleet into a formal line and lead it around the Cardinals rocks at the southern end of Belle Isle and into Quiberon Bay. Once in the roadstead, superior local knowledge of the tricky shallows would allow him to assume a strong defensive position. By leading the line he could place it where he wished before assuming a position in the centre of the line of battle. This would give him centralised control over a cohesive fleet; but it would take time. His tactical rigidity was compounded by further factors. Quiberon Bay would be fought in a violent storm, squalls reduced visibility and 40-knot winds proved challenging to skilled sailors. This affected Conflans’ fleet more than Hawke’s. French ships displayed poor seamanship and fleet management due to the problems of finding experienced seamen and then having crews bottled up in port. Conflans also misjudged the time he had to form line and enter the bay; throughout the morning and early afternoon he seemed unaware of the speed with which Hawke’s vanguard was closing. As a consequence, his fleet was strung out in a line eight miles long. Like all tactical doctrines, the eighteenth-century line of battle served a purpose.

When it could not serve the desired ends, it would be best to abandon it. That is exactly what Hawke was doing: by trusting in the ability of his captains and the seamanship of his crews, his vanguard of seven ships of the line were closing on the French rear as Conflans was rounding the Cardinals.¹⁵

Hawke's van was led by Howe's *Magnanime*, making running repairs having carried away her main topgallant yard. Howe was accompanied by the *Torbay*, *Dorsetshire*, *Resolution*, *Warspite*, *Swiftsure*, *Revenge*, *Montague* and *Defiance*. All were, according to Captain Thomas Stanhope of the *Swiftsure*, 'in a close body, but not in any formed line' when they came up to the French rearguard and opened the action. According to Stanhope they found the French rear in some disorder as the fleet was trying to round the Cardinals. Nevertheless, the rearmost French ships under Admiral de Verger had, by accident, managed to form a 'V' or crescent shape, with faster-sailing vessels forming the apex and slower ships the wings. This presented the opportunity to engage the closing British ships on both sides. Du Verger realised that in order for the van and centre of the fleet to enter the bay his ships would have to fight to buy some time.¹⁶

Contrary to Hawke's orders, *Warspite*'s gunners had fired on the French rear at 12:30 at long range, but Captain Bentley put a stop to it. Other ships followed Hawke's intent to close. The *Magnanime*, *Warspite* and *Montague* were hit by a squall at 15:17 and collided, *Montague* coming off worst. In the same squall the *Dorsetshire* nearly went over with water coming in her lower gun ports. She was saved by luffing up and then, in company with the *Defiance*, passed by *Magnanime* before receiving fire from the French rear as both ships tried to pass up the French line to windward and engage the enemy van by entering Quiberon Bay. *Magnanime* followed, but was looking for the 80-gun *Formidable* carrying du Verger's flag. In fact it was *Warspite* and the *Resolution* that battered in the starboard side of the *Formidable* 'pierced like a cullender by the number of shot she received in the course of the action'. Captain Keppel's 74-gun *Torbay* came up around 16:00 and with two fresh broadsides knocked the *Formidable* out of the action. Du Verger had been killed and the wreck of his ship struck to the *Resolution*.¹⁷

Keppel looked for another opponent, moving on to engage the 74-gun *Thésée* 'yard-arm to yard-arm'. Both ships were heeled over in a squall.

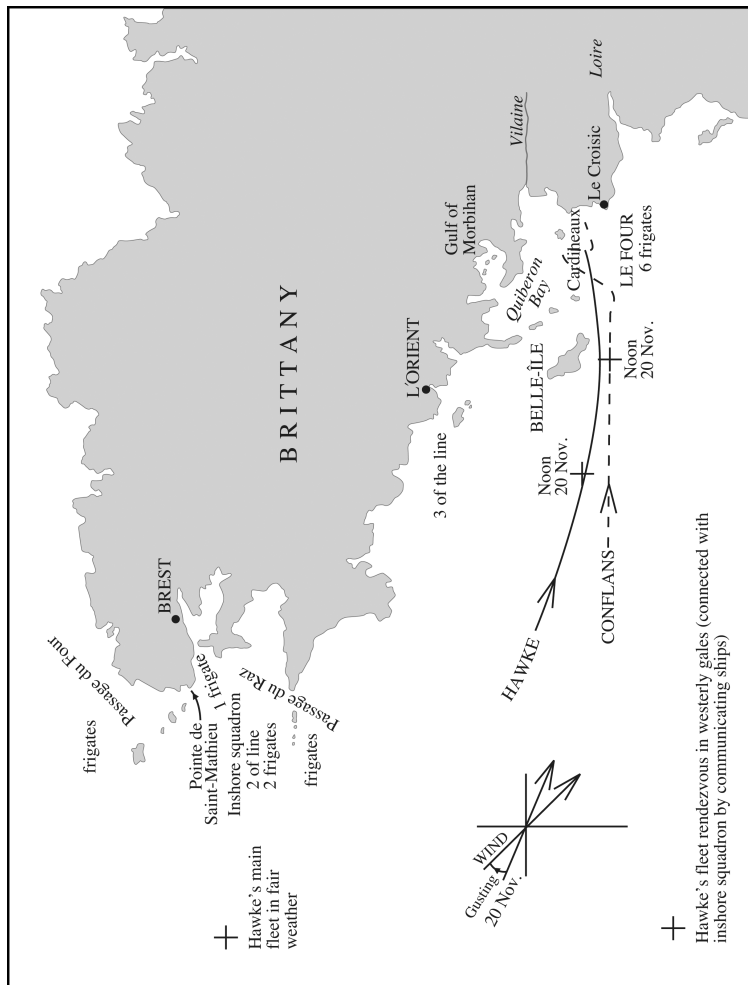


Fig. 7.3. Hawke's blockade of Brest and his chase of Conflans' fleet into Quiberon Bay

The *Torbay* received so much water in her lower gun ports 'we were obliged to fling the Ship up the Wind and She went Round' wrote her master, thereby saving her from foundering. In contrast, the crew of the *Thésée* did not react with the same speed and she went over and sank. Despite Keppel launching boats to pick up survivors only 20 men of her crew of 630 were saved. A number of British ships deliberately tried to engage enemy ships from the leeward side, allowing them to use their windward lower gun ports without fear of heeling over. Some British captains kept their leeward gun ports closed; Keppel obviously did not but was saved by superior seamanship. The French, as evidenced by the fate of the *Thésée* would suffer greatly for trying to fight with their leeward lower guns and for their inferior seamanship.¹⁸

All the while the rest of Hawke's fleet had been closing, with the *Royal George* rounding the Cardinals and entering Quiberon Bay at 15:55. Hawke sighted Conflans' flagship, the *Soleil Royal*. Conflans had rounded the Cardinals at 14:30 but the squalls and a shift in the wind prevented him from reaching the safety of the Morbihan. He resolved to tack the van and centre to lead the French back out of the bay and assist their heavily engaged rear. In the weather conditions only six of his fleet made the tack with the *Soleil Royal*, the remainder instead wore round. The result, as recalled by a French officer, was an utter mess: 'The confusion was awful, when the van, in which I was, tried to go about. Part could not do it. We were in a funnel, as it were, all on top of each other, with rocks on one side of us and ships on the other. So we anchored'. Despite the chaos, at 16:00 Conflans, with six ships of the line, was finally coming to the assistance of his rear just as Hawke was forcing his way into the bay.¹⁹

Given the wind, shallows, rocks and French superior knowledge of the bay, Hawke's master expressed much concern at the prospect of entering Quiberon Bay. Hawke was fully aware of the risks, but, with the French flagship finally in reach, judged them of lesser concern than achieving the destruction of the French fleet and ending the invasion threat. 'You have done your duty in this remonstrance', he retorted, 'now obey my orders, and lay me alongside the French admiral.' With the French close by, the quickest and safest way to navigate the unfamiliar waters was to follow the French warships.²⁰

Hawke's 100-gun *Royal George* had pulled ahead of the rest of the main body. At 16:35, in attempting to bring the *Soleil Royal* to action, *Royal George* came under fire from at least four enemy ships. *Royal George* returned the compliment and emptied two broadsides from a range of 10 to 20 yards into the 74-gun *Superbe* which was trying to protect the *Soleil Royal*. After the second broadside *Superbe* was hit by a squall. Poor gunnery discipline, combined with the effect of Hawke's broadsides, saw her lower gun ports remain open while the guns were hauled in for reloading and she heeled over and sank with all hands. Hawke's Chaplain Robert English thought the French fire was ill-disciplined: 'their confusion was so great that, of many hundreds of shot, I do not believe that more than 30 or 40 struck the ship'.²¹

By this time Conflans was heading north-east and back into the bay, followed by the *Tonnant* and the rest of the French ships that had tacked with him, the *Orient*, *Intrépide*, *Eveill  * and *Solitaire*. Support, in the form of Admiral Hardy's *Union*, Commodore Young's *Mars* and the *Hero* commanded by Captain George Edgcumbe, was finally coming up to Hawke. As darkness descended the 74-gun *H  ros* struck to Howe's *Magnanime*, the French ship having suffered 400 casualties. Heading north *Soleil Royal* collided with *Tonnant*, carrying away the flagship's bowsprit. Unable to tack, Conflans did at least manage to anchor, preventing his ship running aground as the gale continued to blow.

The battle was over but both sides now faced a fight with the elements. At around 17:00 on 20 November Hawke, concerned for the safety of his ships in the strong winds and shallow water, signalled for the fleet to anchor. In the gloom not all could see the signal and the *Dorsetshire*, *Revenge*, *Defiance* and *Swiftsure* headed out to sea where they rode out the night. During the hours of darkness Hawke heard many guns of distress fired but could not ascertain whether they were friend or foe. As dawn broke Hawke surveyed a scene of chaos. The *Resolution*, to which the *Formidable* had surrendered, had been dismasted and driven on to the Four Shoals and was a wreck. Even more evident was the fact that during the course of the afternoon of 20 November and the subsequent night, Conflans' fleet had simply disintegrated. The badly mauled *Soleil Royal*, anchored in the midst of the British fleet in the darkness, had cut and run. Conflans drove his flagship ashore near Le Croisic and on 22 November

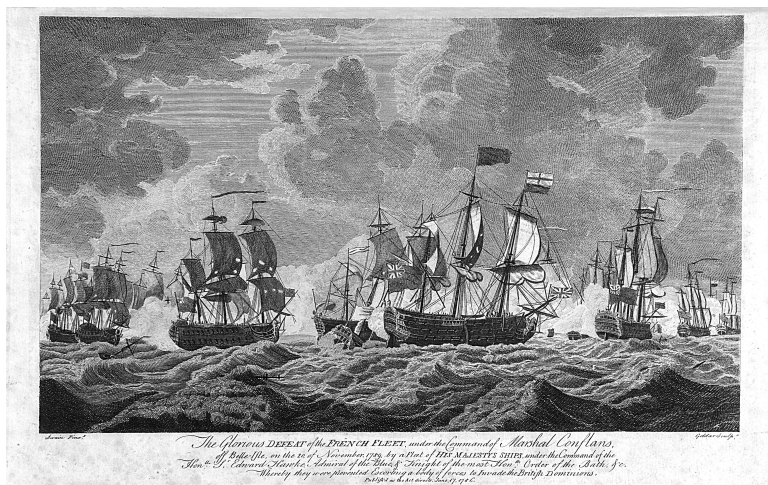


Fig. 7.4 The Battle of Quiberon Bay, note the sea state and storm clouds

ordered her to be burned. The French *Héros*, which had struck to the *Magnanime* but escaped in the darkness, shared her commander's fate, running aground at Le Croisic. While *Soleil Royal's* crew went about burning their ship, Hawke had sent some ships further up into the bay and Royal Navy boat crews landed and set the *Héros* alight. On the morning of 21 November, Hawke had tried to send the *Essex* in to pursue the French flagship but, in an example of the dangerous conditions, she had shared the fate of the *Resolution*, running aground on the Four Shoals. The majority of the crew were saved and her wreck, along with that of the *Resolution*, was burned by the British.²²

The 70-gun *Juste* from Conflans' rear division had been battered by British ships; she limped out of the bay and was wrecked at the mouth of the Loire river. Seven ships of the line had fled to the River Vilaine and after heaving their heavy guns over the side, had just managed to enter the river with a couple of frigates for protection. Hawke was preparing to attack them with a force of frigates and fireships but bad weather forced him to abandon the attempt. One of these French ships, the *Inflexible*, was wrecked in the river during a gale on 1 January 1760. Of the remaining six, four were bottled up in the Vilaine until escaping in January 1761, while the remaining two only made it out in April 1762.

A further eight French ships of the line, including six from the centre and van, had also fled the scene. Escaping from Quiberon Bay they headed for Rochefort. Once the weather cleared a little Hawke sent Keppel with a small squadron to look into Basque Roads. On 29 November Keppel found the French ships, with much damage to their rigging, warping up the River Charente having already removed their heavy guns. Given their predicament it would be very difficult for them to come out. This was an important consideration, as they comprised a potentially dangerous squadron of two 80-gun ships, two 74s, two 70s and a couple of 64s. They were blockaded in Rochefort for the rest of the war.²³

Going by his signals, Hawke seems to have been faced with a simple task to 'chase' and 'engage' the enemy. In a gale operating off a lee shore of which the enemy had superior knowledge it was, of course, much more complex and dangerous than that. What had allowed him to catch Conflans was a combination of the French Admiral's strict adherence to doctrine and his belief that Hawke could not catch him, along with some fast-sailing, clean-hulled British warships, particularly the *Magnanime* and *Royal George*, superior ship handling, seamanship and gunnery in the British fleet. This superiority would have been immaterial if ships' captains and crew had not displayed skill and bravery in chasing down the enemy. In fact, due to some ships' poorer sailing, the weather and the paucity of daylight, only ten of Hawke's 23 ships of the line actually came into action. Moreover, recent French research has shown that only 13 ships of Conflans' fleet fired more than one broadside, while two of the French rear did not fight at all. The five that did fight received the brunt of the British attack and suffered for it.²⁴

With Minorca and the fate of Byng still in recent memory, Hawke was keen to make it clear that the failure of most of his ships of the line to get into action was not due to a lack of fighting spirit:

In attacking a flying enemy it was impossible, in the space of a short winter's day, that all our ships should be able to get into action, or all those of the enemy brought to it. The commanders and companies of such as did come up with the rear of the French, on the 20th, behaved with the greatest intrepidity, and gave the strongest proofs of a true British spirit. In the same manner, I am satisfied would those have acquitted themselves whose bad going ships, or the distance they were at in the morning, prevented from getting up.

He reinforced the point: ‘When I consider the season of the year, the hard gales on the day of action, a flying enemy, the shortness of the day, and the coast we are on, I can boldly affirm, that all that could possibly be done, has been done’. Two more hours of daylight, Hawke asserted, and not one of the French ships would have escaped.²⁵

Hawke could still be pleased with his work. Although Nelson would destroy or capture 11 French ships at the Nile in 1798, in strategic terms Quiberon Bay was the most decisive naval battle of the eighteenth century. The French lost seven ships of the line: the *Formidable* was captured, the *Thésée* and *Superbe* sunk, the *Héros* and *Soleil Royal* burned. The battle also directly led to the loss of the *Juste* and the *Inflexible*. Hawke’s actions also caused the eight ships to run for Rochefort where they spent the rest of the war, while it would take many months to get the remaining six out of the River Vilaine. Out of 21 French ships of the line on 20 November, Hawke removed 15 from French naval plans for the rest of the war. Adding to French woes was the loss of 2,500 lives including precious experienced seamen, further reducing the pool available to man their ships. On just the two French ships that sunk, *Thésée* and *Superbe*, over 1,200 lives had been lost. Hawke had lost two ships, the *Resolution* and *Essex*, ‘owing to the weather not the enemy’, and casualties, killed and wounded, were in the region of 300 men. Simply put, for every British casualty the French had lost more than eight men. The Brest fleet, the threat of invasion, in fact the French navy, had been decisively dealt with by Hawke. There was no ‘Byng principle’ off Quiberon Bay, but a highly skilled, aggressive fighting admiral.²⁶

Summing up 1759

Quiberon Bay was the nail in the coffin of any possible French invasion of the British Isles. Stocks, which had been falling during 1759, now surged upwards. The actor David Garrick, in penning the lyrics to ‘Heart of Oak’, made numerous references to the invasion threat: ‘They say they’ll invade us these terrible foe’; the invasion barges ‘should their flat-bottoms, in darkness set oar’; and to the nature of the battle of Quiberon Bay: ‘If they run, why we follow, and run them ashore.’ In July 1759 in Chatham Dockyard’s No. 2 Dock the keel had been laid for a new ship of

the line; in October 1760, in commemoration of the year of victories, she was christened HMS *Victory*. Quiberon Bay also decided the ultimate fate of French Canada, for the transatlantic link between Old and New France had been fatally severed. British operations in that theatre could now proceed with the knowledge that there would be little if any succour coming from France.²⁷

Victory at Minden had provided respite to Hanover for at least another year, but the victories of British seapower at Lagos Bay and Quiberon Bay crushed French naval power. Versailles lost 12 ships of the line and thousands of sailors from a rapidly diminishing pool, the Toulon squadron was knocked out for the remainder of the war, the Brest fleet battered and then blockaded in Lorient and Rochefort, and the invasion flotilla under lock and key in Morbihan. British naval superiority was turning into supremacy, for by 1759 the mainstay of British naval strategy, the Western Squadron, was almost no longer needed.²⁸

For Versailles this all added up to an *annus horribilis*. French strategy for 1759 had been borne out of a desperate financial situation and a need to force Britain to the peace table. By the end of the year the situation was even worse. Humiliated on land and at sea, if France appeared to be losing the war at the start of the year that seemed to be confirmed by the end of the year. The navy had spent 30 million livres out of a budget of 57 millions livres in just the failed invasion attempt alone, mainly on the *prames* and flatboats to carry the troops. Even then not all of the designated naval expenditure actually made it to naval coffers. The navy, as the army, continued to overspend anyway. Revenue for 1760 was estimated at 140 million livres, but expenditure would be somewhere in the region of 357 million. France gave up on its maritime trade and colonial possessions and the naval budget was slashed from 77 million livres in 1759 to 23 million in 1760, most of which was for paying overspend from the year before.²⁹

After news of Quebec, the French government stopped paying creditors, Spain declined the opportunity to loan Versailles money and French financiers declared themselves bankrupt, with the court financier coming close to doing the same. Credit bills and wages went unpaid, impacting upon her ability to raise money. France could not raise enough money through taxation to cover interest payments on long-term loans;

the French state was no longer creditworthy. France was also running out of cash. Money had been sent to Canada and to the army in Germany. The loss of her overseas trade ruined an important supply of incoming hard cash. Coin flowed out of the country. In desperation, Louis XV sent the royal plate to be melted into specie, but that only fuelled concern. France was no longer a military or commercial power warned Choiseul. His thoughts were similar to those of the French minister, the Abbé Bernis, who had realised as early as August 1758 that: 'No more commerce, consequently no more money, no more circulation. No navy, consequently, no resources to resist England. The navy no longer has seamen, and its lack of money removes any hope of procuring them.'³⁰

The fundamental problem for France, as identified by the Naval and Colonial Minister Nicholas Berryer, was that while Britain was a full-time seapower, France was only able to exert seapower intermittently and with some warning to the British:

all plans and expeditions are liable to fail. The reason is obvious; for when the French navy wants to make an expedition it is forced to let the world know it four or five months in advance; the English soon hear of it, and are in a condition to prevent it by blockading the ports, and in fact to frustrate any measures that may be taken.

Berryer was arguing for 12 ships of the line to save Martinique, essential for French finances and to prop up the French positions in peace talks, as well as reinforcements to the East Indies. The answer was simple; by the end of 1759 France was virtually bankrupt, unable to raise loans and had run out of hard cash. France 'had lost the war. The only question was, by how much'.³¹

CHAPTER 8

‘Not the least fear of them
being at sea filled me either
with distraction or irresolution’

Home Waters, 1760–3

Events during the winter of 1759–60 highlighted the potential for the French to still cause trouble. On 15 October 1759 the privateer Captain François Thurot escaped from Dunkirk after the blockading fleet under Commodore William Boys had been blown off station. Thurot’s squadron of six frigates and corvettes containing 1,300 troops ran to Sweden in the same gale to pick up victuals, before heading back into the North Sea. Two of his ships had already turned for home when he took the rest around the coast of Scotland. In a gale off the Irish coast a further ship was sent reeling away. On 21 February 1760 Thurot put 600 men ashore at Carrickfergus, seizing the castle. Short of provisions and thinking like a true buccaneer, he offered to go away if the residents of Carrickfergus provided supplies. This they duly did and Thurot sailed off.

In the meantime, the Admiralty had ordered frigates to hunt him down. On 28 February Thurot’s three remaining frigates were caught by Commodore John Elliot in the 32-gun *Æolus*, accompanied by the 36-guns *Pallas* and *Brilliant*. Around 04:00 Elliot sighted the French ships and gave chase, bringing on an action around 09:00. He laid *Æolus* alongside Thurot’s 44-gun *Maréchal de Belleisle* at which ‘the action became general’. For an hour and a half Elliot and Thurot fought until ‘all three struck their



Fig. 8.1. Action off the Isle of Man, 28 February 1760

colours'. In fact, the *Blonde* and *Terpsichore* had struck soon after the action commenced, in contrast the *Maréchal de Belleisle* had taken such a battering Elliot had to prevent her sinking. Thurot had fallen in the fight. Both the *Blonde* and *Terpsichore* were taken into the Royal Navy.¹

By the time of Thurot's cruise Britain had, for all intents and purposes, won the war. The issue now was when France would make peace and on what terms. There were, however, a number of naval matters still to tidy up. In home waters, while the threat from Brest had been negated at Quiberon Bay, the French ships at Rochefort and the Morbihan required watching over. Hawke returned to England in January 1760 and a new fleet under Boscawen sailed to keep the French ships under lock and key. Apart from his two trips to Torbay, Hawke had maintained a near-continuous presence off Brest for eight months. During Boscawen's watch the system of victualling and rotating ships to return for repair would continue. His health recovered, Hawke was ordered back to the Western Squadron in August 1760. Boscawen returned home, made one more cruise at sea, and died ashore in England on 10 January 1761.²

Peace discussions

In a political sense eighteenth-century conflict was inherently limited in nature. War was not absolute; it served the political objects of the policy makers related to eighteenth-century concepts of security, influence, territorial possession and honour. The question for Pitt and other British ministers in 1760 was not necessarily how to completely defeat France, that was never a British object, but how to turn British success into a peace acceptable to domestic public opinion, her ally Frederick the Great, and crucially, to Versailles. The French knew they were losing the war, but hoped to continue it in order to alter the balance of *by how much* in their favour. Seapower had placed Britain in a commanding position *vis-a-vis* France, but there remained the fear of French success against Hanover. That meant continuing the war in Germany, and at an alarmingly increasing cost – the total war estimate for 1760 was a massive £15.5 million, more than a third of which was funding Ferdinand's army in Germany and paying for the Prussian subsidy. Moreover, the alliance with Frederick was now starting to seem more of a hindrance than a benefit, as his victories had dried up and his position became more desperate.³

In November 1759 a joint Anglo-Prussian Declaration had proposed a general peace congress, though Pitt was keen to delay it until final success in Canada and India had been achieved. The initiative was given added impetus with the death of King Ferdinand of Spain in August and the accession of Charles III, who offered Spanish mediation in the Anglo-French conflict. What the French wanted was Spain to threaten to declare war if Britain did not accept mediation, which in turn would lead them to handing back their conquests in America. This was clearly not acceptable to the British, nor was the French plan to exclude Prussia from the peace. Fundamentally, due to French naval weakness, Madrid knew full well that entry into the war would inevitably lead to a maritime war against the supremacy of the Royal Navy.

Despite the drawdown in operations in the Mediterranean, Anson had kept a force deployed there. Admiral Brodrick was watching over the dregs of de la Clue's fleet sheltering in Cadiz since the battle of Lagos. Brodrick was driven off the blockade in December 1759 by bad weather

and the French ships slipped out and made Toulon in January 1760. That allowed the majority of the Royal Navy's ships in that theatre to be brought home for repair and cleaning, ready to sail back out the following year. In May 1760 the fleet, under Admiral Saunders – comprising 13 ships of the line and a dozen frigates and cruisers – was back on station to watch over Toulon and prey on French shipping in the eastern Mediterranean. It also had an ulterior motive, for operating out of Gibraltar near the major Spanish base at Cadiz it acted as visible reminder to Madrid of the might of the Royal Navy. The message was clear, given the Royal Navy's superiority Spanish entry into the war would inevitably lead to Spanish naval losses, colonial losses and, ultimately, defeat. For the time being, the Royal Navy kept Spain out of the conflict. For Choiseul this spelt further disaster:

we no longer have ships, colonies, or resources, we will not relieve the forces of the King of Spain and will be forced, whatever advantages we have on land [referring to Hanover], to cede to necessity and accept the most onerous and shameful peace conditions.

Faced with such a humiliating situation, France could not afford to give up the war and Spain could not afford to enter it. The Anglo-French conflict would go on.⁴

While the negotiations had been underway the Royal Navy had continued operations in European waters. Admiral Rodney was still off Le Havre during 1759 and into 1760. In July his ships roamed the Channel, attacking French shore positions at Ouistreham, Sallenelles and Port-en-Bessin, before taking French fishing boats off Dieppe. To the south, with Hawke back in command of the Western Squadron in August his focus remained on the French warships and shipping in the Morbihan and Vilaine. Plans were afoot to utilise troops to land at Quiberon Bay and attack them, but that would be brought to a halt by news from Germany and Pitt's desire to attack an alternative object.⁵

While Newcastle had always been a keen supporter of a 'continental policy' Pitt was always more circumspect, understanding that once British troops were committed to the European theatre they were difficult to extract. However, confronted with Versailles' admission that

the naval war had been lost and the consequent refocusing of what money could be raised towards the war in Germany, Ferdinand now faced 140,000 French troops. He clearly needed reinforcements and Pitt was now willing to grant them to end the war with one final push. The British contingent grew from 10,000 to 22,000 during 1760, providing Ferdinand with an army of around 98,000 men. Expenditure increased likewise, the British contingent costing the government £8.25 million alone. Ferdinand did possess one advantage: his supply lines utilising the Ems and Weser rivers were secure, whereas the French land-based supply lines required protection from around 25,000 troops. All Ferdinand had to do was avoid defeat. When London received news that the French were planning an offensive and a concurrent call from Ferdinand for further help, Pitt leapt at the opportunity to reprise his raiding strategy from 1757-8.⁶

Anson summed it up to Hawke on 9 October: 'The situation of the King's affairs in Germany requiring a diversion to be made on the enemy's coasts.' The target this time would be Belle Isle. An attack on the island had been on the agenda since 1756; a successful occupation might lead to its exchange for Minorca in a peace settlement. If not then it would serve as a base to assist the Royal Navy's blockade of French ports, while, possibly, tying down a large French land force in the vicinity. Although the naval situation had changed by 1760, the situation in Germany had not and the plan still had much to recommend it. Naval opinion continued to point to the need to keep French ports blockaded, and possession of the island would dominate access to the Atlantic. Pitt saw it as an ideal way to prevent more troops going to Germany. If the attack also tied down French troops, even better. Finally, as long as Belle Isle was held France was unlikely to offer Minorca to Madrid to try to bring Spain into the war.⁷

Captain Augustus Keppel had already been consulted by the Cabinet and the Admiralty and tasked with collecting transports for the expedition's 10,000 troops. In fact the destination was not yet decided upon, with some thinking it would sail to attack Mauritius in the East Indies. On 9 October, Anson asked for Hawke's opinion on the suitability of Belle Isle, in the meantime the King finally agreed that Belle Isle would indeed be the target. The arrival of Hawke's reply, detailing his plans to



Fig. 8.2. Captain Augustus Keppel

attack French shipping in the Vilaine and Morbihan rather than Belle Isle, played on the King's mind. There was possibly a showdown between Pitt and the King. The next day, 25 October 1760, King George II died of a heart attack, throwing the domestic political situation into turmoil. That was because his grandson, the 22-year-old King George III, was very much under the influence of Lord Bute and both disliked Pitt immensely. Nevertheless, with Cabinet approval for the Belle Isle descent delayed until November – far too late in the year to launch the attack – the operation would have to wait until the following year.⁸

In the meantime, for all the money spent the news from Germany was bad. Despite inflicting heavier losses on their French opponents, a detachment of Ferdinand's army had been beaten in battle on 16 October. The German campaign would go on for at least another year, and it would require even more support. With the public becoming 'war weary', the new King unwilling to continue British operations in Germany, the European stalemate and with Frederick also calling for the

continuation of the £670,000 subsidy, many were turning their minds to peace. Why go to the expense of defending Hanover when, if the French did occupy it, it could be exchanged for captured French sugar islands?

The winter of 1760–1 was one of strategic impasse, with cracks appearing in the Pitt–Newcastle ministry. On the continent, however, the winter of 1760–1 saw Ferdinand take the offensive, driving the French back, and by March 1761 things were looking very bleak indeed for the French army in Germany. By March, Versailles had come round to the need for peace and the talks lasted until September. Choiseul was, in fact, playing a double game, talking to Britain of peace and Spain of an anti-British alliance. The former was based on the principle of *uti possidetis*, namely conquests were the rightful property of the current owner rather than who they had been taken from. The devil was working out the dates from which ownership stemmed. Pitt, still in office, was keen to delay, for the expedition to Belle Isle had finally sailed and formal possession of that would enhance British leverage.

Choiseul, increasingly frustrated, insisted to Madrid that France was keen for peace, but also argued that the Spanish Empire was next on the list of British targets. If Spain did enter the war France might stop the peace talks. For Madrid, so his point continued, it was better to fight now with France than later without. Madrid – upset over British seizures of her neutral shipping, with the carrot of Minorca dangled once again and sensing an opportunity to get in on the Newfoundland fishing trade – seemed more amenable now to joining with France than the previous year. Charles III fervently believed that, faced with a Franco-Spanish alliance, Britain would back down. Two agreements were made. The first saw the resurrection of the Bourbon family compact, the defensive alliance between France and Spain which would come into force once peace had been made with Britain. If Britain did not reach a settlement with France by 1 May 1762, Spain would declare war against Britain. This would, Choiseul hoped, give Spain sufficient time to prepare her fleet and military for war. It would prove to be a disastrous miscalculation.⁹

The Belle Isle expedition, 1761

In the meantime, the expedition to Belle Isle had finally been approved by George III on 25 March 1761, and it sailed four days later. With Spain appearing more belligerent, it would not do to send a large expedition outside of European waters. Belle Isle was the only realistic target. The massive armada of 11 ships of the line, 12 frigates and smaller vessels convoying 100 transports arrived off their destination on 7 April. Displaying the excellent army–navy cooperation that was now evident in British amphibious operations, the respective commanders, Keppel and Brigadier Studholme Hodgson, decided to land on the eastern part of the island at Port-Andro. Both men had seen how indecision had wrecked the 1757 Rochefort expedition and were determined to maximise the element of surprise with a swift landing. The first assault wave of 3,000 men was launched the next day in 50 flat-bottomed boats, while supporting fire from the 74-gun *Dragon*, 60-guns *Achilles* and *Prince of Orange*, plus two bomb-vessels silenced a French fort overlooking the landing site. So far things had gone well.¹⁰

The initial plan had called for 10,000 troops, but Hodgson had only 7,000 and some of them lacked combat experience, many of their officers were absent and, finally, with the expedition gestating since November the previous year and with Royal Navy ships reconnoitring the island, the French were prepared. ‘The enemy have been at work upon it ever since Sir Edward Hawke appeared here in the winter’ noted Hodgson. The defenders had been busy constructing batteries, digging trenches and making the cliffs even more difficult to climb. A diversion against Sauzon to the north-east by Captain Thomas Stanhope’s 70-gun *Swiftsure* failed to distract the French commander Sainte-Croix from the obvious landing site at Port-Andro. The first British assault wave came under terrible fire from 1,000 defenders on the cliff tops and could make no progress. There was no option but to retire with the ships of the line covering the evacuation. The army had suffered 72 men killed, 72 wounded and 246 taken prisoner by the French, while the navy had lost 15 killed, 29 wounded with 19 missing.¹¹

That night a gale blew up, wrecking around half of the flatboats. Keppel and Hodgson sunk into momentary gloom, looking for an

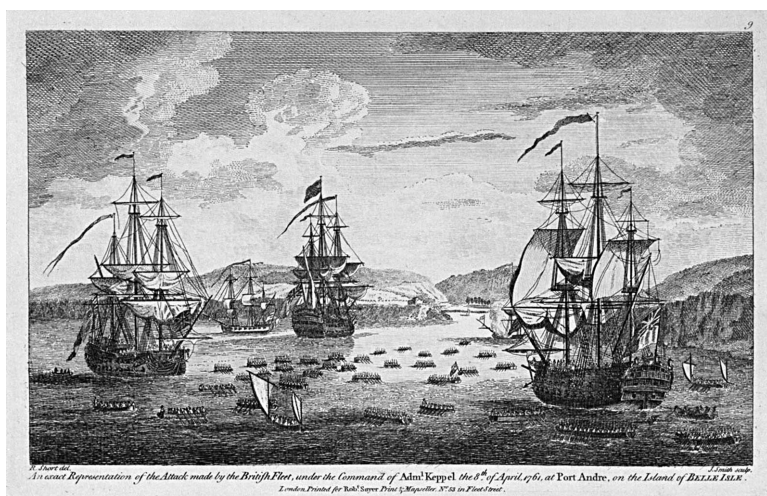


Fig. 8.3. An exact representation of the attack made by the British Fleet, under the command of Admiral Keppel 8 April 1761 at Port Andre, on the Island of Belle Isle

alternative landing site, but none presented itself. Their spirits were raised by the arrival of two more ships of the line and four infantry battalions, sent out by Pitt when he received Keppel's report of the initial setback. The extra troops offered the opportunity of not just another landing attempt, but two diversionary attacks. Hodgson considered the island a fortress, with all the obvious landing sites well covered by French defensive positions. The answer, perhaps inspired by Wolfe's conduct at Quebec, was to land where the enemy had thought the cliffs impassable. The plan was for the main force to land at Fort d'Arsic, with a diversion at St Foy assisted by the *Dragon*, *Achilles*, *Prince of Orange* and the 90-gun *Sandwich*, plus two bomb-vessels. A third demonstration would again be held to the north at Sauzon.¹²

On the morning of 22 April the second attack began. Despite support from ships of the line, it quickly became evident to the commander of the main force, Brigadier General John Craufurd, that the position at Fort d'Arsic was too strong. Nevertheless, he kept his men in flatboats off the shore. Success came from the secondary landing at St Foy where, supported by the *Swiftsure*, 64-guns *Hampton Court* and *Essex* and the 44-gun *Lynn*, the first men ashore not only achieved complete surprise but found the shore undefended. Soldiers and 600 marines from the fleet

scrambled up a rocky path to the plateau above. Stanhope's *Swiftsure* signalled the initial success and other flatboats in the vicinity made for the site. The British troops on the plateau drove off French defenders. Sainte-Croix, his eyes fixed on Craufurd's force, was taken completely by surprise, but quickly responded by ordering a major counterattack. By the time it materialised there were enough British troops to drive it off. Craufurd brought his force round to reinforce the position. By 17:00 the British expedition was ashore and, by nightfall, secure in the interior of the island. Sainte-Croix fell back upon the fortress at Le Palais, capital of the island, signalling to the mainland for help, though with Keppel's fleet securing local command of the sea that was a remote possibility.¹³

Apart from the French fortress city of Le Palais, Hodgson was now in complete control of the island, but he was faced with the problem of laying siege to Le Palais which had been upgraded by the great fortress engineer Vauban. As part of the French policy of strengthening the island, Sainte-Croix's garrison of 3,400 men had been sent 12 months' worth of provisions, shot and powder for guns and plenty of small arms. Choiseul had not even considered a landing possible; the news that a British expedition was lodged on French soil was greeted at Versailles with disbelief. In response relief squadrons were ordered to be made ready at Brest and Rochefort, but any attempt to succour the garrison would have to either evade or defeat Keppel's force. That was unlikely given the strength of his fleet; reinforced by six ships on the line on 31 April, Keppel now had 20 ships of the line under his command allowing him to blockade Rochefort.

On Belle Isle British progress was slow, despite the efforts of sailors hauling stores and ordnance up the cliffs. With its bomb-vessels, broadsides and, crucially, ability to land heavy 24pdr and 32pdr guns, the navy played the role of a floating siege battery. A British assault captured outlying works on 13 May and parallels and batteries were constructed within 400 yards of the city walls. Ten days later heavy naval ordnance was ready to batter open a breach which was duly achieved on 6 June. The next day Sainte-Croix surrendered; Pitt's expedition to Belle Isle had succeeded.¹⁴

Belle Isle could now serve as a huge provisions storehouse for the Western Squadron and, importantly, it also supplied fresh water from a

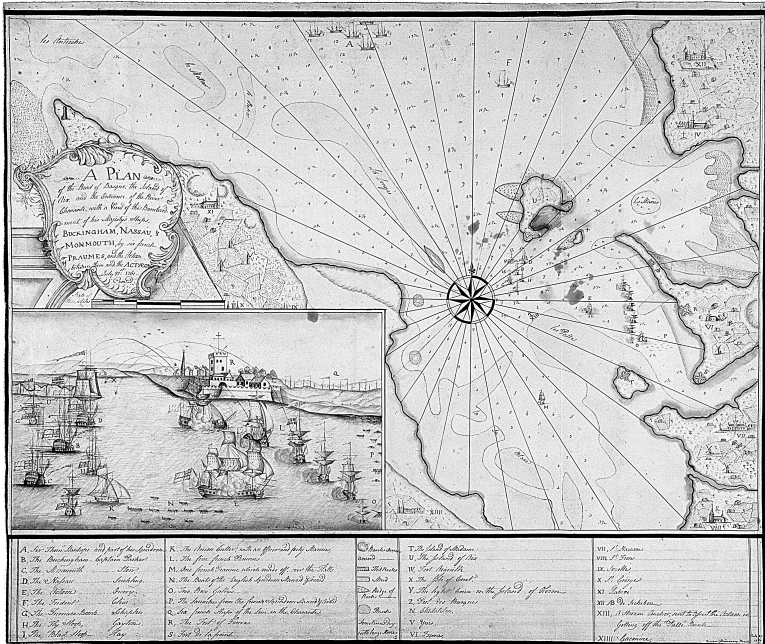


Fig. 8.4. After the fall of Belle Isle the French did continue to attack Keppel's fleet as this plan of the action of 21 July highlights

reservoir built for the French navy. Keppel also used the island to grow fresh vegetables for the fleet. This added to the victualling system by which sloops supplied his fleet from Plymouth. Crucially, ships could operate from secure anchorages in the lee of the island all year round. Keppel began to exploit this sustainability by searching for places to carry out descents on the mainland, but found the French had mobilised troops for coastal defence. In British hands Belle Isle was a strategic lock which kept French warships safely in their Atlantic ports while crippling any nascent recovery of French trade. At a future peace Versailles could simply not leave it in British hands, and that provided much leverage to British diplomacy.¹⁵

The immediate impact, however, was that despite causing the French to make some changes to their deployment plans for an offensive in Germany during the 1761 campaigning season, the British capture of Belle Isle did not change the tenor of French intent in that theatre. Instead, it seemed to British observers that the French, convinced this would be the

last campaign of the war, were willing to throw everything they could at securing Hanover in order to rescue something. The French plan called for 160,000 men, in two armies, to march separately into Germany, before uniting to overwhelm Ferdinand. In fact when the armies under Marshals Broglie and Soubise united they numbered 90,000, still giving the French a marked advantage over Ferdinand's army, which was now down to 65,000 men. The French attacked Ferdinand on 15–16 July but he had chosen his ground well, near Vellinghausen. The French attacks lacked coordination as Soubise's force hardly moved. French losses were 4,700 compared to 1,400 in the Allied army. It was another clear French tactical defeat, but with superior numbers they still held a strong operational position. The French commanders decided to divide their forces, and Brunswick was invested. Ferdinand raced to lift the siege. Both sides suffered logistical problems and by November, after another campaigning season in which the French had occupied Hesse but achieved little else, both sides were happy to go into winter quarters. But Hanover was still free.¹⁶

While the campaign was underway in Germany, another round of Anglo-French peace talks had taken place. Pitt wanted to exclude the French entirely from the Newfoundland fisheries, but Newcastle, Hardwicke and others thought this too much. To deny the French access would be seen by the rest of Europe as unacceptable, they feared. With Britain in such a strong position by 1761 it was entirely possible that Britain would win by *too much*, sowing the seeds for future discontent and conflict. Nevertheless, the two sides were drawing together by late June, with the French tacitly accepting British possession of most of North America but unwilling to give up its claim to the Newfoundland fisheries and demanding the return of Cape Breton. Choiseul, Hardwicke feared, was again playing for time waiting for success in Germany and possible Spanish entry into the war. With this in mind, Pitt was desperate for an expedition to sail from North America to take Martinique. Strengthening the British hand, on 20 July news arrived of the captures of Pondicherry in the East and Dominica in the West Indies (see Chapter 9). Yet, it was news of Ferdinand's victory that caused Hardwicke to think the strategic situation changed: 'France will become more reasonable. How happy is it that Mons. De Choiseul has waited for his own Humiliation'.¹⁷

With British ministers in a buoyant mood, the French compounded the

situation by demanding that Spanish complaints against Britain be included in the peace and that Britain should abandon Frederick to his fate at the hands of Austria, Russia and France. Pitt gave this dishonourable proposal short shrift. Again Choiseul was playing for time until Spain was ready to join the war. Pitt, the most belligerent of British ministers, was becoming a lone voice in a Cabinet that was looking for peace and willing to make concessions. Surmising that the Bourbon powers were already joined, he argued for a pre-emptive war on Spain before she was ready and hoped to seize the incoming 1761 silver *flota*. The rest of the Cabinet disagreed and with the King keen to get rid of him Pitt resigned on 5 October. Despite the conviction of the remaining ministers that Spain would not enter the war, at least they had the good sense to reinforce Saunders' Mediterranean squadron.¹⁸

On 8 December 1761 the Spanish government gave orders for all British shipping in Spanish ports to be seized and gave authority for positions overseas to take defensive and offensive measures against Britain. Although the family compact did not come into effect until 29 March 1762, it had in fact been brought into reality by the 15 August 1761 agreement. War itself became a reality on 4 January 1762. Newcastle, Bute and others had been duped, Pitt had been right, and delaying in good faith had allowed the Spanish to benefit from the *flota* arriving at Cadiz in September 1761. Up to this point, British naval power had acted as a deterrent to Madrid. Now, however, Charles III was keen to take the opportunity to use the war to put an end to the illicit trade between the Spanish American empire and British colonies in the West Indies.¹⁹

While a new enemy was appearing an old ally was being dropped. With Pitt gone from Cabinet, Bute's main concern was ending the expensive British commitment to Germany and the wider German war as soon as possible. Frederick's subsidy would not be renewed, British troops would be withdrawn and Ferdinand's army broken up. Bute's myopic thinking failed to grasp the need for a 'good' peace in Europe for Britain to safeguard the imperial position built up overseas. Despite Bute's misgivings, Ferdinand again dealt a blow to the French at Wilhemsthal, on 24 June 1762, preventing yet another attempt to invade Hanover. Bute, thinking of his domestic political position before the good of the country, was appalled at Ferdinand's victory.

War with Spain

If the conduct of the ministry towards the German war was dishonourable, the same cannot be said for issues further south, for Spanish entry into the war raised a number of concerns. There was the Spanish fleet base at Cadiz; Saunders had already sent a paper to Anson outlining his plan for a raid on the Spanish fleet. Intelligence pointed to ten Spanish ships of the line at Cadiz, though by January Saunders was aware that the defences had been strengthened in advance of war. Nevertheless, Saunders' main task remained preventing the French Toulon fleet exiting the Mediterranean. But he knew the French were not ready to sail and so moved to take up station off Cadiz. Once the formal declaration of war was known in London, a reinforcement of two ships of the line was sent out to Saunders. The Spanish fleet of 11 ships of the line at Ferrol now also entered the naval equation, for their proximity to Brest and Rochefort raised the issue of a combined Franco-Spanish descent upon the British Isles.²⁰

This was, in fact, what Choiseul was planning. It was another complex plan designed to force Britain to the peace table and reflected the changing circumstances in central Europe, where the death of Tsaritsa Elizabeth signalled a *volte-face* in Russian policy – St Petersburg and Berlin now talked of alliance not war, leaving Vienna out on a limb. Hanover was secure. Choiseul looked to rescue something from the war by directly attacking Britain. But Franco-Spanish grand strategy lacked coherence, with Madrid envisaging a multifaceted, and somewhat hare-brained, assault on British interests in Gibraltar, Ireland and Jamaica, combined with a French land-based attack on Holland. Instead, Choiseul wanted Spain to throw her entire weight against Britain's ally, Portugal. This would hit Britain in the pocket, for Portugal was a crucial source of South American gold and silver for London. Access to this hard cash was vital for Ferdinand's army to pay its way and for subsidies to Britain's allies. Invading Portugal would suck in British troops and ships, denuding the security of the British Isles and leaving London vulnerable to a French *coup de main*, which would force peace upon Britain. This time the invasion plan envisaged the first assault wave transiting an uncommanded sea and seizing a strongpoint in the British Isles as a secure beachhead for further

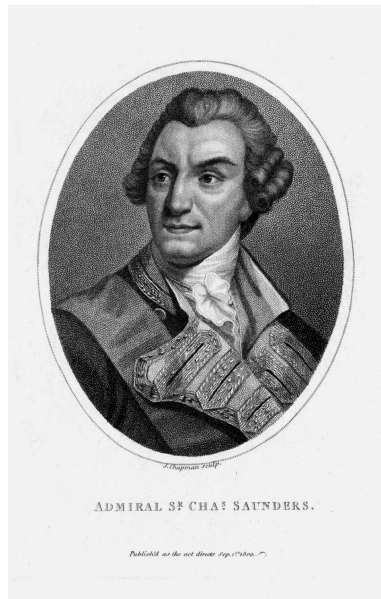


Fig. 8.5. Admiral Charles Saunders

successive waves. In such fashion 50,000 troops could be landed over the course of five weeks. That would undermine British credit and in consequence undermine support for Ferdinand's army in Germany.²¹

It required the Royal Navy to be distracted for a crucial five-week period to give, in Choiseul's words, 'command of the Channel' to France and Spain. At his disposal were 52 ships of the line, but the main problem was their dispersal across a number of ports: Brest (6), Rochefort (10), Ferrol (8), Cadiz (14), Cartagena (4) and Toulon (10).

Joining them up was the vexed issue; the 18 Royal Navy ships of the line under Admiral Saunders were placed between the Franco-Spanish Atlantic and Mediterranean fleets. The ten French ships of the line in Rochefort were blockaded by 12 Royal Navy ships of the line, but they could not fight their way out, for to leave the Charente river they would have to unload their guns. They needed another force to drive off the Royal Navy's blockade. Choiseul was, therefore, forced to concentrate his plans on utilising the ships at Brest, Ferrol and Cadiz, but half a dozen or so would need to be kept back in Cadiz to defend the port from a British

descent. The one glimmer of hope for Choiseul's plan was that having secured command of the sea in 1759 the Royal Navy had been busy exploiting that command and was somewhat dispersed. Diversions against Gibraltar, the West Indies and Portugal would further draw troops and ships away from the Channel, perhaps granting the temporary command necessary for the invasion. Ferrol would form the focal point for the concentration of Franco-Spanish naval force; this would give weight to the danger to Gibraltar. Lacking a nuanced understanding of British strategy, Choiseul expected the Western Squadron to sail and reinforce Saunders' fleet to protect Gibraltar.²²

As early as January 1762 Anson had made dispositions for meeting the combined Franco-Spanish naval threat. Saunders' fleet was watching over the Toulon, Cartagena and Cadiz fleets. With three ships coming back from Mauritius, and those in Brest, the Charente, Vilaine, Ferrol and Lorient, he surmised the enemy had 31 ships of the line. Opposing them were nine Royal Navy ships of the line off Brest, 11 in Basque Roads, four at Belle Isle and two 50s nearly ready for sea, with five more ships of the line (including two 90-gun ships) expected ready by the middle of February and another two at the beginning of March. That would give the Royal Navy 33 ships of the line in the Channel to watch over the potential invasion ports. Moreover, while the French had only three of 80 guns, the Royal Navy could get to sea eight ships of the line over 80 guns. So not only did Anson have superior numbers to work with, he also had heavier ships. The naval strategy for 1762 was to watch and wait to see what the enemy attempted; then, if the French and Spanish did try to combine or sail, meet them in battle.²³

While Anson was desperate to get the Western Squadron to sea, the linchpin of naval strategy was now Saunders' 18 ships of the line. Operating in the Straits he was placed between both the enemy Mediterranean and Atlantic fleets, and while he could hold his own against either, a combined force would pose much danger. But he also had Cadiz and the Straits to watch over. Blockading Cadiz would leave the Straits open, cruising to westward to cover both would leave him vulnerable to being blown into the Atlantic. It was, therefore, imperative to ensure some certainty and for Saunders that was blocking the Gut to make sure

the Mediterranean ships could not get out; the risk of the Cadiz fleet getting out was one that had to be run.²⁴

Just as Saunders had deployed his fleet an urgent request for assistance came from Thomas Hay, the British Ambassador at Lisbon. Despite his intelligence indicating that the Toulon fleet remained in port, Saunders was reluctant to deplete his force. Nevertheless, he sent up three ships of the line to 'see what was the matter there'. What the Portuguese wanted was a small British squadron to keep the Tagus open while they repaired the forts ready for the defence of Lisbon if the Spanish invaded. They would also, in conjunction with the Portuguese fleet, keep the Tagus open by deterring the Ferrol squadron sailing to blockade the port, allowing for the arrival of a convoy carrying 6,000 British troops sent from Belle Isle to help the Portuguese defence, something Saunders was not aware of. In fact Saunders changed his mind and recalled his three of the line, but before they could rejoin his fleet Ambassador Hay informed Saunders of the expected arrival of the troops. This coincided with two additional ships of the line arriving, and with intelligence that the enemy had only 17 ships of the line in the Mediterranean, Saunders sailed to block up the Gut leaving the three at Lisbon until the safe arrival of the convoy.²⁵

By 4 March Saunders was convinced he had made the right decision. It seemed unlikely that the Spanish ships at Cadiz would undertake offensive measures unless they were joined by the French fleet from Toulon or the ships from Cartagena. This, with no indication coming from Ferrol of an impending attack, meant that Lisbon seemed safe. New intelligence from Toulon confirmed that the French ships showed no signs of moving, so he took the opportunity to watch over Cadiz where the three ships of the line from Lisbon joined him. With the Tagus forts completed and the Portuguese ships providing enough of a deterrent, it was hoped, to a Spanish attack by sea, they had fulfilled their purpose. Back in the Gut in April, Saunders received another request from Hay, this time for ships to cruise off the Algarve to deter a Spanish invasion from Andalucía. Saunders acquiesced again, sending a couple of cruisers to look over the coast despite his own lack of frigates. Here two of Saunders' cruisers, the 28-gun *Active* and 18-gun *Favourite*, took the Spanish ship *Hermione*. Stuffed full of Peruvian silver she was valued at £500,000.²⁶

Saunders' deployment cannot be seen in purely defensive terms. His prime role was to keep the enemy Mediterranean ships bottled up and prevent a junction between the enemies' Atlantic and Mediterranean fleets. But by doing so, he fulfilled a key part of British offensive strategy, keeping enemy naval strength in Europe and therefore preventing it from interfering with colonial operations in the West and East Indies. As, however, many times before the main problem for the Royal Navy was not French or Spanish warships but the weather. It was a gale that forced Commodore Spry off Brest in January 1762 and allowed a squadron of seven French ships of the line to escape. There was some consternation that this was the first part of a grand French scheme for joining up the disparate fleets, but his destination was in fact the Caribbean.²⁷

After further pressure from Anson in April, Hawke hoisted his flag on 27 April but took some time to get to sea. In the meantime, during May a few French privateers had appeared off the Tagus and prevented a British convoy from sailing causing further requests from Hay for naval assistance. Following the death of Anson on 6 June, on 12 June the Admiralty outlined the plan to transport six battalions from England to Belle Isle, swapping them for six battalions from the garrison which would then go on to Portugal. With rumours that the Spanish ships in Ferrol might try to intercept the troop convoy, Hawke's prime object was to ensure its safe arrival. If the enemy were still in Ferrol, a light escort would probably do, but if they were at sea 'you are to proceed with your whole force and accompany the said transports off the bar of Lisbon, where you are to remain till they have got safely over it'.²⁸

Hawke was at sea on 26 June and off Ushant on 1 July, sending two 64-gun ships to Belle Isle to form a convoy for the troops moving on to Portugal. His object was not the Ferrol squadron, but the safe arrival of the British troops into the Tagus. His deployment ignored the Admiralty's desire to blockade Ferrol; instead Hawke utilised his cruisers to watch over the port while the main fleet remained to the north. He rebuffed the Admiralty's naive plans, lacking as they now did the sure touch of Anson's experienced hand: 'The enemy cannot get out with a westerly wind, and if they come out in an easterly I must have intelligence, and they can't get in again. When the army arrives I shall see it safe round the Cape.' In other words, he was telling them to mind their own business and let him, as the

man on the spot, judge the best mode of achieving the object. As he noted, 'not the least fear of them being at sea filled me either with distraction or irresolution'. With the troops safely in Lisbon by mid-August Hawke was replaced by Sir Charles Hardy, who missed the arrival back into European waters of a French squadron under Blénac. Hawke, the victor of Quiberon Bay and master of utilising the Western Squadron, struck his flag for the last time on 3 September 1762.²⁹

Further south in early June reports had reached Saunders that the Cartagena ships were at sea (albeit for just a week before they headed back to port) and intelligence that the Toulon fleet was preparing. He stuck to his task of blocking up the Gut. At the end of June the Toulon fleet put to sea, Saunders was aware of this when he received news of the convoy of troops coming to Belle Isle. Like Hawke, Saunders immediately grasped the key object: the safe arrival of the troops. He left the Gut to blockade the Cadiz fleet until the troops were safely arrived in the Tagus in mid-July. Saunders then headed back to his watch over the Gut.

The Spanish invasion of Portugal had finally begun on 30 April 1762. It was a land invasion, for with the Royal Navy omnipresent in southern waters the Spanish were unable to launch a sea-based *coup de main* against Lisbon. Ashore, the Spanish campaign was beset by strategic blunders and logistical problems and became completely bogged down. Although Almeida fell on 25 August and the Spaniards reached the Tagus, the army was riven by disease and retreated in early November. The overall effect was to dampen Charles III's desire for war and force Madrid to look to the peace table. On the other side of the coin, sea access had provided maritime mobility, allowing Britain to move troops from England to Belle Isle and thence to Portugal to protect British interests. The 6,000 British redcoats lifted Portuguese morale, provided tangible support to the Portuguese defence and helped train the Portuguese army. Three Royal Navy captains were sent to join the Portuguese fleet to try and increase its efficiency. A successful defence of Portugal, as indeed it turned out to be, ensured that Britain did not have to hand over an overseas conquest or even Belle Isle in exchange for Portuguese independence, and preserved the vital supply route for South American gold and silver. British support to Portugal also sent a strong diplomatic message to France and Spain as London, Madrid and Versailles were all thinking once again about peace.³⁰

CHAPTER 9

‘An expedition of great consequence’

A Global War, 1760–3

Canada conquered

For the British in North America, the object during the particularly harsh winter of 1759–60 was to sustain their position at Quebec as a launch pad for operations in 1760. Around 700 men of the garrison died during the worst months of winter, but by spring the sick list had diminished and morale remained good. With the worst over, the next danger came from a French counterattack, and General Lévis, Montcalm’s successor, began operations on 20 April. Eight days later he was nearing Quebec when the garrison commander, General Murray, launched an ill-judged attack, gifting the French a tactical victory and a morale-boosting success. Lévis could now invest the city; but there was a problem. Unlike British expeditions, which could utilise heavy 24pdr and 32pdr naval guns, Lévis did not have access to French ships of the line and therefore lacked the weight of shot necessary to create a breach in the defences.¹

Versailles had tried to do *something* to assist Lévis, but it was a poor effort. A frigate and five merchantmen sailed from the Gironde with provisions, guns and 400 reinforcements. Three were immediately taken by the Royal Navy. The other three made it across the Atlantic to find Royal Navy warships in the St Lawrence so instead headed for Chaleur Bay. Lévis would have no support. The Royal Navy ships were a squadron sent out from England under Commodore Robert Swanton in the 70-gun *Vanguard*, with the 28-gun *Lowestoft* and 32-gun *Diana*, and which had escorted a convoy of storeships to Quebec. Swanton, like many others in

his squadron, had been with the fleet in 1759 and had much knowledge of the St Lawrence. He now decided to use his superior naval force to clear the French frigates *Pomone* and *Atalanta* that had escaped upriver in 1759 and which Lévis was now using to support his operations. On 16 May 1760 Swanton attacked and the French ships ran for it upriver. The *Pomone* ran aground and was burned, the *Atalanta* put up a short fight before grounding and striking her colours. All the transports were sunk to prevent them falling into British hands. Having lost control of the river to the Royal Navy and now vulnerable to a flanking move, Lévis gave up the siege.²

Murray could now commence his part of a three-pronged assault upon Montreal. On 14 July, 2,500 men in 40 transports started working upriver, escorted by the 40-gun frigate *Penzance*, the *Diana*, the 16-gun sloop *Porcupine* and 8-gun schooner *Gaspée*. They were accompanied by floating batteries and a flotilla of 35 smaller warships. Lévis was pinned in Montreal and could not respond to the other two British pincers advancing on the city. The main force – 9,000 men under Amherst – had embarked at Oswego on 10 August and sailed across Lake Ontario, before entering the St Lawrence and heading downriver. Amherst arrived at Montreal on 6 September where he was joined by the third detachment of 3,400 men under Colonel Haviland which had embarked at Crown Point on 11 August and sailed up Lakes George and Champlain.³

Montreal, a largely wooden city, lacked formal defences and Lévis' garrison of 3,500 men was outnumbered by Amherst's combined force of 14,000 men. Lévis' Indian allies now made peace with the British. The French position was hopeless, and on 8 September Montreal, the last vestige of New France, surrendered. Success in North America was due to the Royal Navy cutting off New France from Europe, securing local command of the sea and the North American lake and river network, and providing operational mobility, tactical support and expertise. The prime British offensive war aim had been achieved: the conquest of Canada was complete and the war in North America was at an end. The cost to Britain had been around £4 million, a level of expenditure that could be sustained due to Britain's preponderance in global trade protected by the Royal Navy, which allowed for long-term borrowing on largely favourable terms. In comparison, French spending on the defence of Canada was a

mere 10 per cent of that figure. The conquest of Canada now offered up the prospect of utilising troops and ships in North America for other colonial objects.⁴

The East Indies, 1759–63

The war was also coming to a triumphant end in the East. Back in September 1758 when Admiral d'Aché arrived at Mauritius he encountered numerous problems in victualling his fleet and did not make it back to Ceylon until late August 1759. He had been gone a full year. With d'Aché absent, Kempenfelt had forced Lally to lift the siege of Madras in February 1759. Pocock, waiting for the northeast monsoon season to end, had remained in Bombay until 9 April. In his absence Clive had detached a force to assault the French positions near Masulipatam, equidistant between Calcutta and Madras. It was captured by 2,500 troops under Lieutenant Colonel Francis Forde on 8 April. A month later Forde agreed a treaty with the local ruler that revenues previously given to France would instead go to Britain. The French, denied another source of cash, were being hemmed in around Pondicherry.⁵

After leaving Bombay, Pocock arrived off Ceylon well in advance of d'Aché. On 30 June Pocock's force was augmented with the arrival of the 68-gun *Grafton*, 60-gun *Sunderland* and five East India ships packed full of vital stores. He now commenced the long wait for d'Aché, but by early August, frustrated and worried that he might have missed his quarry, Pocock sailed for Pondicherry. On 2 September both fleets spotted each other heading for Pondicherry. Pocock immediately signalled a 'general chase', but d'Aché's object was to deliver vital supplies to Pondicherry and he declined battle. The two fleets lost contact in poor weather.⁶

Pocock knew the French could only be heading for Pondicherry and he arrived off the port on 8 September. D'Aché arrived the next day; he now faced a fight to fulfil his mission. Of his 11 ships of the line only d'Aché's two 74s and two 64s were French navy, his 68-gun and six 54s were French East India Company. So while Pocock's nine ships of the line comprising his 66-gun *Yarmouth*, Kempenfelt's *Grafton*, the 64-gun *Elizabeth*, 60-guns *Tiger*, *Weymouth* and *Sunderland*, 58-gun *Cumberland* and 50-guns *Newcastle* and *Sailisbury* were numerically inferior – outgunned

and outnumbered in crew – they were all Royal Navy ships. By 11:00 on 10 September both fleets had formed line of battle, though two of Pocock's were dawdling behind his main body. The *Grafton* and *Yarmouth*, at the centre of Pocock's line, focused upon the centre of d'Aché's fleet and his flagship the *Zodiaque*. As Pocock recounted, the battle was fought at 'musket-shot' range with both squadrons firing upon each other with 'great fury' for over two hours until, around 16:00, a deadly broadside wounded d'Aché and killed his flag captain. By that time the French ships had received much hull damage while in return inflicting much damage aloft to Pocock's ships. With the *Zodiaque* battered and d'Aché slipping into unconsciousness the French flagship broke off and headed south-east with the fleet following. Pocock's fleet had lost 570 killed and wounded (compared to 880 in the French), and with much damage aloft were in no state to pursue. During the night Pocock made running repairs, but when the French were spotted again the next day three ships were still under tow. Contrary winds meant he could not beat to windward and d'Aché sailed around Pocock's fleet and into Pondicherry, dropping anchor on 15 September.⁷

The action was the last of the three engagements between Pocock and d'Aché. While tactically indecisive, they were by no means bloodless encounters; the Royal Navy had received 883 casualties but had inflicted 1,980 on the French. They were, however, strategically decisive. While d'Aché spurned his opportunities to use his numerical superiority to deal with Pocock, in turn Pocock guaranteed the security of British possessions by keeping his fleet in being. Pocock's aggressive instincts also offered up the chance to deal a crushing blow to the French if the opportunity arose.⁸

Pocock reached Negapatam on 15 September, made further running repairs, but knew that in order to fully refit he had to reach Madras and that would involve sailing past Pondicherry. That he did 'in the true Elizabethan manner' in light winds in battle order, just out of gunshot range. The wind offered d'Aché every opportunity to come out and fight but he refused and Pocock's stately promenade of a Royal Navy battlefleet outside the port brought scathing criticism upon the French navy. D'Aché compounded the situation by resolving to sail once again for Mauritius, weighing anchor on 17 September. Apoplectic, Lally and the governing council sent a letter after him stating, in no uncertain terms, how d'Aché

and his captains would bear full responsibility if Pondicherry fell. D'Aché returned, but for a brief stay, finally sailing again on 27 September. Once again his exit gave the Royal Navy undisputed control of the sea, leaving Pondicherry vulnerable.⁹

Pocock made it to Madras, repaired, and then sailed to winter at Bombay ensuring the fleet was ready for the next year before heading home in April 1760. Thanks to his efforts Commodore Cornish was off the Coromandel Coast in early 1760 supporting operations ashore. On 6 April the French port of Karikal surrendered after sailors from the fleet hauled three 24pdrs into position to batter the fort. Its loss cut off another source of supplies for Pondicherry. In June Lally turned to Mysore for reinforcements but Admiral Steevens, who had superseded Pocock, was now blockading Pondicherry and intercepting supply ships. Steevens had sufficient vessels to allow him to rotate ships to refresh and refit at Trincomalee. In turn that offered the opportunity for Steevens to continue the blockade during the stormy months. It was risky, but with the French starving in Pondicherry it might force a capitulation.¹⁰

Where was d'Aché? Mauritius had been hit by a typhoon damaging some of his ships and it took months to get them ready to sail. In early June startling news arrived from Versailles that a British expedition being prepared at home was headed for the Indian Ocean. D'Aché's orders were to stay where he was and protect Mauritius. He managed to send two French frigates, *Hermione* and *Baleine*, which made it into Pondicherry and passed on this grave news to Lally. In a classic example of the aggressive tactical mindset of the Royal Navy, Steevens ordered a night-time boat attack upon the *Hermione* and *Baleine*. With oars muffled and boats tied together to maintain cohesion, British sailors caught them by surprise, storming the decks and locking the crew below. Cutting their cables *Hermione* and *Baleine* sailed out of the harbour under fire from French batteries. Both ships were added to the Royal Navy. It was a highly visible sign of the power of the Royal Navy and the impotence of the French to save the city. By this time Colonel Coote had surrounded Pondicherry and was investing it with a regular siege. Could anything save Lally?¹¹

On New Year's Day 1761 a storm blew up and Steevens was forced to order his fleet to cut their cables and head out to sea. Chaos ensued, and

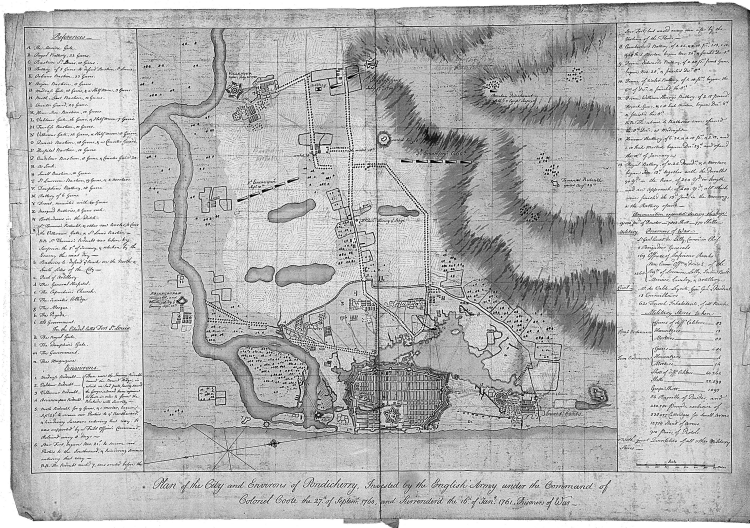


Fig. 9.1. The successful siege of Pondicherry was a triumph of seapower

only Steevens in the *Norfolk* made it. Two of his ships of the line foundered, one was driven ashore and the other four were dismasted; the smaller ships were scattered. Over 1,000 British sailors were drowned, more than had been lost in Pocock's three naval battles. Thankfully for Steevens, Cornish had been out to sea with two ships of the line, while three more arrived shortly after the storm. Steevens reconstituted the blockade on 4 January. Not even an act of god could stop the Royal Navy going about its business. Cut off from supply by land and sea the garrison and inhabitants of Pondicherry were starving to death. Coote proposed harsh terms on 15 January 1761. Left with little option Lally surrendered the last French possession in India. For much of the rest of the year the fortifications and buildings of Pondicherry were razed to the ground.¹²

The West Indies 1759–63

In 1759–60, with the conquest of Canada on the agenda, Pitt had also turned his attention to the West Indies and specifically Martinique. Taking Martinique had a number of attractions. It would deny France any trade

that was still getting through, remove bases for French privateers and it might force Versailles to start thinking seriously about peace. It would give Britain an even stronger hand in peace talks, probably guaranteeing the retention of Canada, while the valuable sugar trade would add to British coffers during the war and if it could be retained in the peace it would help to pay off the war's costs. Despite some Cabinet opposition, Pitt's plan to conquer Martinique had the support of the King, who also understood that it could be exchanged for Minorca.¹³

A force of 7,000 men, under the command of Major General Peregrine Hopson, sailed from Portsmouth on 12 November 1758. With the French still posing a danger at sea, a strong escort was provided. The expedition arrived at Barbados on 3 January 1759. Here it came under the command of Commodore John Moore who had with him the 80-gun *Cambridge*, a 50-gun ship and three frigates. While waiting for the inevitable straggling transports and hospital ships to come in the troops practised disembarking before sailing for Martinique.¹⁴

Arriving off Fort Royal on 15 January, once again it was the navy that led the way. Moore placed the 64-gun *Bristol* off the harbour entrance to smash the defensive forts. Within an hour the defenders had fled and marines from the fleet had taken possession. Using flatboats carried on the transports, the army was landed to the north. Things had so far gone well, but moving inland Hopson found five miles of hilly and wooded terrain lying between him and the French citadel of Fort Royal. It provided ideal defensive positions for the local militia. Convinced that nothing more could be done, Hopson re-embarked and the fleet sailed on 17 January.¹⁵

Hopson and Moore now looked for an object they could achieve. St Pierre was too strong but Guadeloupe, the second most lucrative French island after Martinique, was nearby and on 23 January Moore sent the 90-gun *St George* and 74-guns *Cambridge* and *Norfolk* to close with and batter Fort St Charles on Basse-Terre. Moore's ships suffered much damage aloft and lost 47 sailors and marines killed. Having withstood the bombardment for much of the day, around 17:00 the defenders finally fled. Next the ships fired upon the town, setting fire to warehouses containing rum and sugar. This started a major conflagration which burned down the town and denied the British force much plunder. On 24 January the troops were landed. The attack on Guadeloupe now

bogged down, with Hopson trying to repair Fort St Charles and unsure what to do next. Sickness started to afflict him and his men. It was left to the navy to get things going again, Moore sending the 64-gun *Berwick*, 60-gun *Panther*, 50-gun *Winchester*, 44-guns *Woolwich* and *Roebuck* and 32-gun *Renown* to attack Fort Louis. On 13 February an amphibious assault by a couple of companies of Highlanders, with sailors and marines from the fleet and led by Captain William Harman of the *Berwick*, stormed the fort. Hopson succumbed to illness on 27 February; command now rested with the more energetic General John Barrington, who was working with Moore on a plan of campaign when news arrived that a French fleet of eight ships of the line and three frigates under Admiral Bompar had arrived from Brest.¹⁶

Moore sailed on 13 March leaving behind the *Woolwich*, a couple of bomb-vessels and some sloops. Barrington used them to launch a series of small amphibious operations which defeated the local militia. A force marched overland and seized Baie-Mahault, preventing supplies arriving there from the Dutch island of St Eustatius. By 21 April the rest of Barrington's troop transports arrived and his force was augmented by the *Roebuck*, sent to him by Moore. The defenders had had enough, and Guadeloupe formally surrendered on 1 May and possession of the outlying islands Marie-Galante (an important coffee producer), Deseada, the Île de Saintes and Petite-Terre soon followed. Their capture provided handsome reward to the British economy; coffee exports from Marie-Galante and sugar from Guadeloupe were valued at nearly three-quarters the value of exports from Jamaica, by far the most valuable British possession in the West Indies. The campaign had cost the British army 59 killed and 149 wounded battle casualties, but 800 had been lost to disease.¹⁷

Supporting Barrington and protecting trade stretched Moore's resources. At no point did he consider sailing to meet Bompar in battle; his other objects were the main considerations and they required a defensive stance keeping his fleet 'in being'. Bompar would only become an object if he started to interfere with British plans. It seemed he might do just that when his fleet appeared off St Anne's on 27 April. However, with the inhabitants of Guadeloupe negotiating their surrender Bompar knew that nothing could be done and was back in Fort Royal on 6 May before heading back to Brest, arriving there on 7 November.¹⁸

Moore now sailed for Antigua, where he met a storm of complaint from local merchants and planters. They thought Moore a 'disgrace to his Majesty's navy', for while Bompar had been at sea French privateers had taken 180 British merchant ships. With Bompar now gone Moore turned to the French privateers while assembling British merchantmen into one huge convoy for the journey home. When it sailed it numbered over 300 ships, escorted by eight ships of the line; it arrived safely in England in September 1759.¹⁹

British strategy in the West Indies during 1759 had moved from defensive to offensive, but it was still subsidiary to the major operations in North America in 1759 and 1760. With the need to increase the pressure on France to enter seriously into peace talks, and the removal of the French from Montreal, Pitt had additional motivation and resources for conquering French sugar islands. Pitt's plan for the West Indies for 1761 was to seize St Lucia and Dominica early in the year to allow for another attack on Martinique after the hurricane season. Preparatory orders had been sent to Amherst in December 1760 to prepare forces for operations in the Caribbean. Definite orders went to Amherst in January 1761 and in March Pitt was once again stressing the impact an early victory in the Caribbean might have upon peace negotiations with France. The intrinsic link between overseas operations and European power politics was again evident.²⁰

Amherst had 2,000 men ready to sail from North America, escorted by four ships of the line and three frigates. Arriving at Guadeloupe on 4 June, they joined with the commander of the Leeward Islands station Admiral Sir James Douglas, flying his flag in the 74-gun *Dublin*. Douglas sent the troops and their escort on to Dominica, with the fleet anchoring off the island on 6 June. Lord Rollo, the expedition commander, offered terms which were rejected. Rollo landed his troops immediately, driving French troops out of makeshift defences and capturing their commander; the island surrendered on 8 June. Understanding the European context, Douglas sent a fast ship with the news and Pitt was aware by 20 July of the conquest. Set against preparations for the Belle Isle expedition and with possible Spanish belligerence, it would, Pitt hoped, highlight the threat posed by the Royal Navy to Spanish overseas possessions and therefore act as a deterrent.²¹

Martinique

Pitt had written to Amherst on 24 March 1761 directing him to dispatch at least 6,000 troops, more if he could spare them, as soon as the hurricane season was over to attack Martinique. In the context of the European peace talks, Pitt thought that taking the island 'could not fail to have the most material, and probably a decisive, influence upon the Court of France'. Once again, the wider naval context set by the operations of the Royal Navy allowed transatlantic troop and ship movements. In June 1761, transports lying empty off Belle Isle were redeployed to New York, though their arrival was delayed by bad weather until 20 October. Here they found that Amherst had assembled 7,400 men under Major General Robert Monckton on Staten Island. Further delayed by repairs to the transports, the expedition, consisting of 64 troopships under escort from three ships of the line and a frigate, finally sailed on 19 November. The original plan had been for the expedition to rendezvous at Guadeloupe, but here Douglas had wisely suggested to Amherst to set the rendezvous as Barbados in order to be to windward of Martinique. On Christmas Eve 1761 the expedition arrived at Carlisle Bay, Barbados.²²

In total, once Monckton arrived, Pitt had masterminded the transatlantic assembly of over 25,000 sailors, marines and soldiers. The naval force, now under Admiral George Rodney who had sailed with the reinforcements from England, comprised 17 ships of the line, four 50s and a large number of frigates, sloops and smaller ships. Monckton had 13,000 troops at his disposal. With Douglas sent ahead to blockade the island and prevent any French reinforcements arriving, for Versailles were aware of the target of the expedition, Rodney weighed anchor on 5 January 1762 and a massive flotilla of 175 ships set sail.²³

The expedition arrived off Martinique on 7 January with Rodney using the flexibility and manoeuvrability provided by command of the sea to alarm as much of the coastline as possible in order to prevent the French concentrating their forces. An initial landing by 1,200 men near Fort Royal found the position too strong, while a second landing at Petit Anse d'Arlet could not make progress inland due to the hilly and wooded terrain. Finally, Rodney and Monckton decided upon an attempt at Cas des Navires Bay, where the 1759 expedition had failed. Monckton was

dubious that Rodney's ships could silence the French batteries but the Admiral was confident. Having silenced the batteries Rodney laconically reported to the Admiralty: 'I landed General Monckton with the greatest part of his force by sunset; and the whole army was on shore a little after day light next morning.' By 4 February, British heavy guns were in range of Fort Royal and the town surrendered, Rodney taking possession of 14 French privateers in the harbour. With the main French position now flying the Union Flag, Rodney detached forces to conduct mopping-up operations; by 15 February resistance elsewhere on the island had ceased and Martinique formally capitulated.²⁴

Success, as Rodney noted, was because 'the army and navy continue in perfect health; and carry on the service with the greatest spirit and harmony'. Yet again the sailor's role ashore was vital; they 'made no difficulties in transporting numbers of the heaviest mortars and ship's cannon, up the steepest mountains at a very considerable distance from the sea, and across the enemy's line of fire'. The capture of Martinique signalled the death knell of French resistance in the Leeward Islands. The French navy were now denied the use of Fort Royal, their usual first port of call for repair, fresh water and victuals following the Atlantic crossing. In fact Rodney thought the harbour at Fort Royal far superior to the main British fleet base in the Leeward Islands at English Harbour, Antigua. Martinique in British hands was recognised beyond its political value as a bargaining chip. Hardwicke thought it 'the Key of the West Indies as much as Gibraltar does that of the Mediterranean'. If kept it might 'give England, in effect, the whole Sugar Trade of the World, except what remains in St Domingo'. Further mopping-up operations followed, and when a small expedition under Captain Hervey sailed into the harbour at St Lucia on 26 February the island capitulated. Commodore Swanton's seven ships of the line took the surrender of Grenada on 5 March. The final island to fall, St Vincent, was delayed until 10 April due to the appearance of Admiral Blénac with a French fleet of seven ships of the line and four frigates containing 3,000 troops, which had escaped from Brest on 24 January 1762, arriving too late to save Martinique. Lingerings for a few days, Blénac sailed on to Saint Domingo.^{25,26}

Havana

Despite Blénac's appearance French power in the West Indies had been devastated. But there was still work to be done, for in February 1762 news reached Rodney of war with Spain. Fourteen Spanish ships of the line were at Havana and the object, Rodney immediately recognised, was to prevent Blénac joining them. Rodney's orders only mentioned sending Douglas to reinforce the position at Jamaica, and now, according to intelligence received, it seemed that island would be the target of a Franco-Spanish expedition. Rodney determined to sail to the west, hoping the Admiralty would recognise his 'liberty to construe my instructions in such a manner as to think myself authorised and obliged to succour any of his Majesty's colonies that may be in danger'. He took ten ships of the line, three frigates and three bomb-vessels and headed for Jamaica where, joining with the forces already there, he would have around 20 ships of the line to deal with the combined Franco-Spanish fleet. At St Kitts on 26 March, he received Admiralty orders dated 5 February notifying him that a major expedition would be arriving in the Caribbean and he would be superseded by Admiral George Pocock.²⁷

Pocock's orders were to undertake a 'grand expedition' against the Spanish city of Havana. Rodney was to place ten ships of the line and three or four frigates under Swanton's command, collect enough transports for 8,000 men, victuals for three months, and have them ready to sail with Pocock's force. Rodney's orders were clear and unequivocal, but while he decided to return to Martinique he was still determined to send Douglas with ten ships of the line to cover Jamaica. Douglas, on arriving at Port Royal on 12 April, received news that the French were at Cap-François and unlikely to attack Jamaica, for Rodney's naval dispositions had acted as a deterrent. Yet he recognised that Blénac posed a danger to troops coming down from North America, and so on 22 April Douglas sent Captain Hervey with seven of ships of the line and a couple of frigates to protect the transport convoy.²⁸

If Hawke's victory at Quiberon Bay had rounded off the first *annus mirabilis* of 1759 in style, then the British attack on Havana rounded off the second *annus mirabilis* of 1762 in suitable fashion. The audacious plan was the brainchild of Anson, who based it on an earlier document prepared by

Admiral Sir Charles Knowles who had served off Cuba in the previous war. The plan, along with an attack on Manila in the Philippines, was unanimously approved by the Cabinet on 6 January 1762, just two days after the declaration of war against Spain. In quick time, and set against other pressing issues, 4,400 troops had been assembled in England with sufficient transport tonnage (30 ships) freed up from Belle Isle. Victuals for 16,000 men for seven months and storeships were also provided, all overseen personally by Anson who went down to Portsmouth. On 26 February four infantry regiments were embarked into transports, and on 6 March the expedition – convoyed by six ships of the line under Pocock, specifically chosen by Anson for his navigational skills and seamanship as well as his fighting spirit – set sail. Pocock arrived at Martinique on 26 April to pick up Monckton's 8,000 men.²⁹

The plan involved assembling 34 ships of the line in the West Indies, allowing for a sizeable detachment for the naval part of the expedition. When Pocock arrived at the rendezvous of Cas des Navires Bay, Martinique, he found Monckton's force already embarked. He also found out that while Rodney was at Martinique in the *Marlborough* with three other ships of the line and three 50-gun ships, Douglas had already sailed with his ten of the line. Pocock's position was now tricky to say the least. He was trying to conduct a major amphibious assault in a theatre where the enemy had temporary numerical superiority. Rodney's naval dispositions had threatened the whole expedition, for instead of having a superior naval force concentrated at Martinique to escort the expedition, Pocock was faced with two enemy fleets – Blénac's and the Spanish force at Havana – one of which outnumbered him heavily and the other with which he had parity. Rodney's deployments had, in effect, forced the naval concentration to occur at Cape St Nicholas instead of Martinique. The danger Pocock's force faced was mitigated by two factors. The first was the age-old problem of coordinating allied naval movements, and nothing had shown the French and Spanish to be acting in concert. The second was that the prevailing winds made it favourable for Blénac to sail to Havana, but not for the Spanish ships to sail to Cap-François. Rodney and Douglas had made sure the two enemy fleets could not join together and that a rendezvous at Cape St Nicholas was not as risky as it at first appeared. On 6 May, Pocock bit the bullet and sailed with his eight ships of the line.³⁰

As it turned out this was very much what Anson had intended, for he knew that in order to succeed the expedition must achieve surprise. The usual passage to Havana was to sail south of Jamaica then round Cape Antonio in the Yucatan Channel, before beating to windward up to Havana. The Spanish naval dispositions would give Havana plenty of warning of such an approach. By assembling all of the expedition at Cape St Nicholas, Anson had specifically ordered Pocock to approach Havana through the Old Bahama Channel, a navigational challenge that the Spaniards thought impassable for large fleets, but made possible by possession of an old Spanish chart and a survey of the channel conducted by Captain Elphinstone in the *Richmond* frigate. The passage would be shorter, quicker and guarantee Pocock the surprise he needed to succeed as well as placing him between the Spanish and French fleets.³¹

On the afternoon of 6 June, as Anson was dying, the alarm went up in Havana. Pocock's ships were already in position to begin landing troops. It had taken just five months from inception to his arrival at the target with 156 transports, ordnance vessels, hospital ships, victuallers and store ships, each identified by specific flags and pennants. The landing site at the mouth of the River Coximar was, as was normal by now, selected by Pocock and General George Keppel, Earl of Albemarle, both of whom had copies of Knowles' report which had recommended this site. Command of the landing itself was entrusted to the highly experienced and ever-capable Augustus Keppel, who was also Albemarle's younger brother. The task was to land the army in combat-ready fashion and that was ensured by organising the landing flotilla as per the required army dispositions. Captain Hervey's *Dragon* led in three divisions of flat-bottomed landing boats, each identified by coloured vanes, carrying the assault wave of six infantry battalions.³²

Surprise was complete. The Spanish, aware that war with Britain had commenced, could simply not believe that a British expedition would dare to attack Havana. Even if they did, sufficient warning would come from the west. Knowles' original plan, Anson's vision, Douglas' initiative, Elphinstone's navigational skills and Pocock's leadership allowed troops to land unopposed just five miles from Havana. To the west of the city Pocock, with 13 ships of the line, a couple of frigates and bomb-vessels, plus the storeships and victuallers masquerading as transports, had

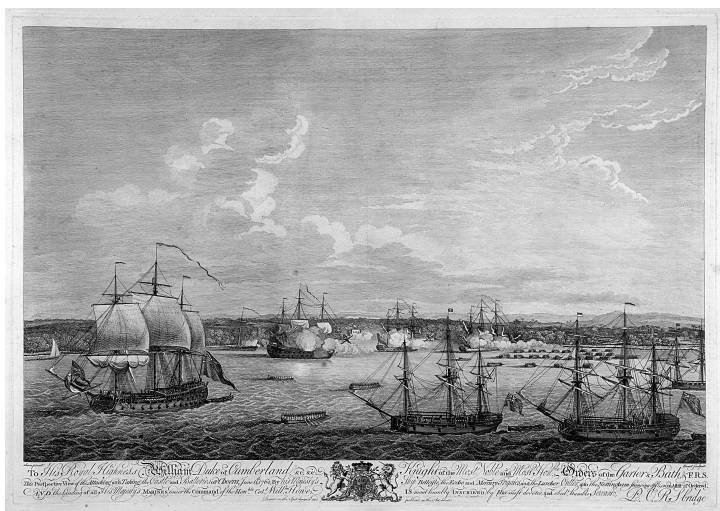


Fig. 9.3 On 11 July the fleet attacked the fort and batteries overlooking El Morro castle

Even heavier guns were requested by Albemarle and Pocock obliged, with a full battery of 32pdrs manned by sailors joining the bombardment. Naval gunfire practice was to fire quickly and accurately. It proved an inspiration, an army officer recounting how army artillery would usually fire 80–90 times in one 24-hour period was now following naval example, firing 149 times in 16 hours. Due to the high rate of fire Pocock had to send a ship to Jamaica to bring as much powder and shot as she could carry. But sickness, in the form of yellow fever, and fatigue were beginning to take their toll upon the besiegers and such high-tempo bombardment was unsustainable. Reducing El Morro was the key and slowly progress was made until it was realised that the sea wall of the fortress had a blind spot. A call went up for miners, met by the Cornishmen of *Namur*, Boscawen's former ship and now Pocock's flagship. By 30 July they had succeeded in tunnelling under a bastion; the mine, stuffed with explosives, was detonated and created a breach. After a short bombardment the British troops stormed in, a quick and bloody fight ensued, but the defenders were pushed back with heavy losses. On 28 July the first American convoy had arrived with the second following on 2 August, though the latter had lost six transports when it blundered into

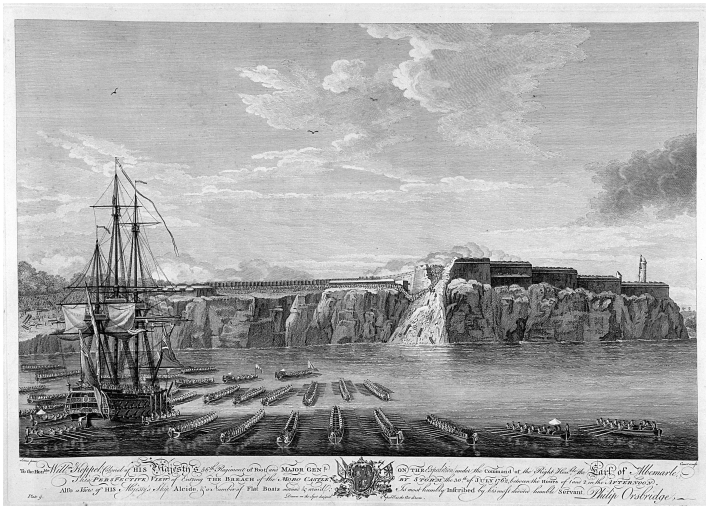


Fig. 9.4 The walls of El Morro castle breached by a mine and open to assault

an escorted French convoy, delivering 3,267 relatively fresh men. Sickness was also affecting the Spanish garrison and the loss of El Morro was a blow to morale. British batteries were redirected from El Morro to the town, with the bombardment commencing on 11 August. After six hours the Spanish defences were crippled and the governor asked for terms. After a few days of discussions Havana surrendered on 13 August.³⁵

The capture of nine Spanish ships of the line, the loss of the three scuttled by the defenders and the destruction of two on the stocks saw 20 per cent of total Spanish battleship strength wiped out in one go. British officers became very rich indeed: the total prize pot from captures, merchant goods and treasure came to an astronomical £737,000. Pocock and Albemarle both received the enormous sum of £123,000; a seaman on the other hand received £3 16s. Set against the treasure, the cost in blood was horrific, between 7 June and 18 October out of a force of 16,000 troops, 5,366 died of whom 4,708 were lost to disease.³⁶

Due to its complex organisation, the need for a speedy operation, the distances involved, the requirement to cross an uncommanded sea, the time of the war, the navigational challenges and the reputed

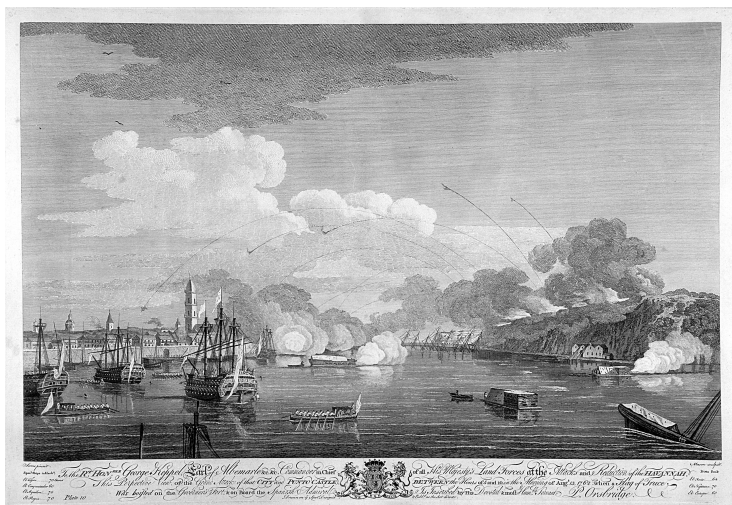


Fig. 9.5 The final bombardment of Havana which led to the capitulation of the Spanish garrison

impregnability of the city, the capture of Havana was the most remarkable achievement of the Royal Navy during the entire war. Moreover, it had all been achieved without Pitt, although the wider conditions of degenerating French seapower, protecting Hanover and conquering North America all provided the freedom of action and security to even consider such an audacious attempt. That it succeeded is testimony to Anson, Knowles, Pocock, Elphinstone, Hervey and Keppel. Pocock headed for England on 3 November taking five ships of the line, several Spanish prizes and 50 transports, leaving Keppel, now promoted to Rear Admiral, in command at Havana.³⁷

EPILOGUE

‘Victories which augment her honour and her riches’

Manila

The attack on Havana had been sanctioned at a Cabinet meeting on 6 January 1762. Also approved at that meeting was an extended raid against the Spanish town of Manila in the Philippines. In the meantime, diplomatic talks to find a settlement continued during the summer of 1762, but France, Spain and Britain were all watching and waiting to see if the outcome of ongoing operations might tip the balance in their favour. The shambolic Spanish invasion of Portugal pushed Madrid into a more constructive stance, a position that would be reinforced with the loss of Havana. Versailles was also now keen for peace, as any settlement in the Austrian–Prussian conflict would leave Britain free to make further attacks on remaining French overseas possessions. For Britain, the Cabinet were still awaiting the outcome of the expeditions to Havana and Manila. News of the capture of the former arrived in London on 29 September and would serve as a bargaining counter should Spain succeed in Portugal. Madrid and Versailles were both shocked at its capture which, in effect, allowed Britain to turn negotiations into an ultimatum. British success directly led to a diplomatic and political outcome. Preliminaries were signed at Fontainebleau on 3 November 1762, with ratification of the Treaty of Paris on 10 February 1763.¹

There was still no news from Manila. It was, from the outset, an unusual project. The idea had come from a man with knowledge of the East, Colonel William Draper, and involved a joint state–private sector

expedition between the forces of the King and those of the East India Company. Part of the object was undoubtedly to plunder Spanish commerce and treasure. But the main object was diplomatic and political: to force Madrid to the peace table. The orders sent to Admiral Steevens made it clear that territorial conquest was not on the agenda, the operation was more of a large-scale raid. Possession of Manila would be temporary, with it being highly likely that it would be returned to Spain in peace discussions, perhaps in exchange for Portugal if that were needed. In true Elizabethan style, plunder from the city would be shared between the state and the company.²

Draper sailed from England in January 1762, and after a six-month passage arrived at Madras. The East Indies squadron was at Trincomalee for repairs, so it was not until 10 July that the commanders met and Draper gained the approval of Admiral Samuel Cornish, his second in command Commodore Tiddeman and Governor Pigot to release the 79th Foot, 2,000 sepoy and supporting troops. In fact, when the expedition sailed there were only 567 men of the 79th, 610 sepoy and, once the artillery, pioneers and other men were added in, a total of just 1,738 to take Manila.³

Cornish had some concerns over the state of the squadron. Refitting the 60-gun *America* had taken up the majority of the stores while the 74-gun *Lennox* was 'weak and leaky'. As for the 68-gun *Grafton*, 64-gun *Elizabeth* and 60-gun *Weymouth*, 'their timbers many of them quite rotten', they 'will not long continue fit for Service'. They were old ships, but with nothing else available they had to do. Cornish flew his flag in the 74-gun *Norfolk* with the experienced Captain Richard Kempenfelt as his flag captain. The 60-gun *Panther* and 50-gun *Falmouth* along with three frigates completed Cornish's squadron.

While the Company provided two storeships, Cornish hired the *Admiral Steevens* on the navy's account. He also found problems sourcing suitable transports and was left with the inconvenient expedient of using ships of the line, of which he took eight for the expedition leaving just three for trade protection. Using ships of the line to carry troops conflicted with their role as warships and the risk was only worth running due to the absence of Spanish warships. The troops were loaded so that key elements were spread across the fleet to ensure if a ship were lost it

would not compromise the whole expedition. Unusually, there were no flat-bottomed boats to land the assault wave; there was neither the time, nor was it felt they would stand up to the difficult embarkation conditions that were expected.⁴

Speed was of the essence and on 1 August the fleet weighed anchor and set sail. Cornish's squadron suffered from a number of incidents, the *Weymouth* suffering damage aloft and the *Falmouth* being delayed even before he reached Malacca to water. Sailing again on 27 August it was not until late on 23 September that Cornish's squadron sailed into Manila Bay. A busy night of boat work ensued, taking soundings and looking for a place to land the troops. One boat, with oars muffled, went under the walls of the fort at Cavite dropping buoys. Ashore, the Spaniards were still unaware that they were at war, but if Draper hoped his expedition would browbeat them into surrender he was mistaken.⁵

Due to the obvious lack of Spanish preparations Draper and Cornish decided to attack Manila right away and not to waste time on the outlying Spanish positions. Both men transferred to the *Seaford* frigate to reconnoitre the coast, settling on a position near Malate Church, a mile to the south of Manila. With the plan for the tactical mechanics of the landing well worked out in advance, all that was needed was an agreed landing site. By 17:30 the *Seaford* and *Argo* frigates were anchored 600 yards offshore to cover the landing. The landing force advanced in three groups – the centre and right groups were to divert Spanish attention from the left, main attack which headed for Malate. The attack was launched at 19:00. As the seamen in the ships' boats pulled for the shore gunfire from the *Seaford* and *Argo* skedaddled some Spanish troops that had gathered there. With four longboats, each armed with a 6pdr in the bow, providing close fire support from the flanks the assault force neared the shore. In the surf several boats floundered, overturning and spilling their crews and troops into the sea, but most of the assault force made it safely ashore.⁶

With the Spanish defenders providing little in the way of tangible resistance, Malate Church was taken with a follow-up wave of troops landing during the night. The next day, Draper's troops had move to within 300 yards of Manila's walls, occupying the church of San Diego. This provided essential shelter when, later in the day, the monsoon rains began. This increased the danger of landing over the beach in the surf and

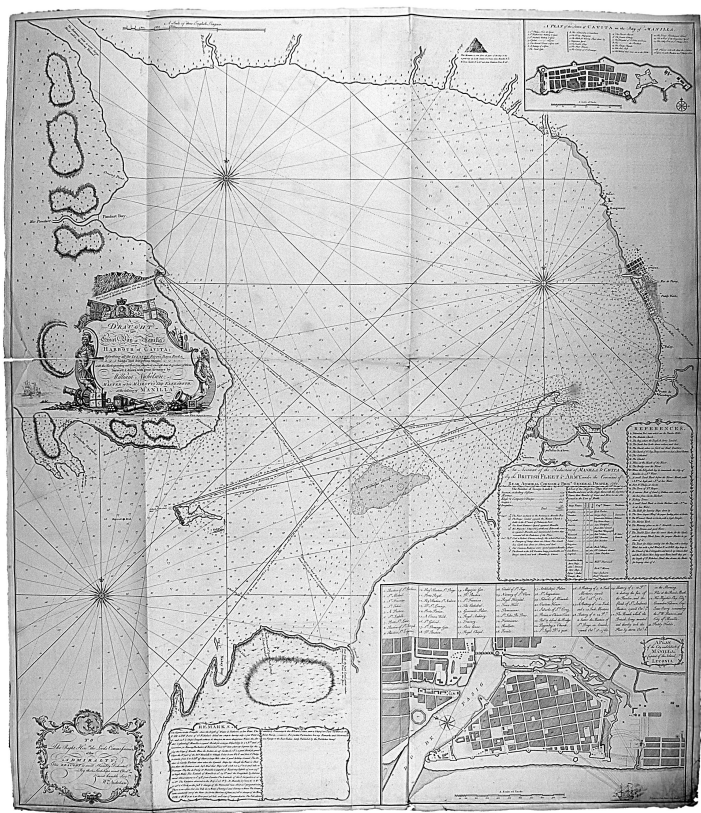


Fig. E.1. The bay and city of Manila

several lives were lost. Of the naval support Draper enthused they provided 'all possible assistance, and Captain Jocelyn, who was Entrusted with the Care of the Disembarkation did everything that could be wish'd or expected from a Diligent, Good Officer'. Once again the Royal Marines played a key role: 338 were landed at Malate to maintain communications between the army and the fleet and to guard the store and artillery parks. Cornish landed 679 sailors to serve ashore with the army.⁷

Draper needed all the help he could get. His army was not only too small to surround the city, but it was also too small to conduct regular siege works. Instead, efforts were focused on creating a battery strong

enough to breach the walls and eight 24pdrs landed from the fleet were ranged in. William Nichelson, master of the *Elizabeth*, took one of her boats close inshore, sounding and buoying a navigable channel to a point where she could anchor to bring her guns to bear on the enemy batteries. On the 29 September Nichelson guided the *Elizabeth* to her firing position but, finding that it was still too far out, he closed even further though her fire was not as effective as Draper had hoped.

The wind was now increasing and the *Southsea Castle*, which had become separated from Cornish's fleet, arrived with the army's besieging equipment. In the worsening weather the *Southsea Castle* ran aground, though this made it easier to unload her. With the fleet now facing a full-blown gale, the *Elizabeth* and *Falmouth* both had narrow escapes, riding at anchor in the shallows. As Nichelson related, if they had grounded they would have broken up. Despite these problems, progress continued ashore with further batteries, built and then served by sailors, pounding Manila's walls.⁸

The populace and defenders of Manila were starting to suffer. The combined effect of the land batteries and the fire from the fleet forced the defenders into a sortie on 4 October, which was beaten back by the seamen and a detachment of the 79th Foot. This failure, along with the British fire which by 5 October had created a breach in the walls, broke Spanish morale. At first light on 6 October the British assault went in, the 79th Foot leading the way with the seamen hot on their heels. Resistance was sporadic and ineffective and the city surrendered. Manila was in British hands. The conquerors' minds now turned to plunder; Draper set a ransom of \$4 million on the city (which the Spanish largely refused to pay). Cornish found ample naval stores in the dockyard to allow him to refit his worn-out ships.⁹

The logistical and gunfire support provided by the navy had been the determining factor in the success of the operation, backed up by close cooperation between the services. The honour of informing the King of the final British success of the war fell to Captain Kempenfelt, who delivered the news on 16 April 1763 – more than two months after the definite articles of the Peace of Paris had been signed. The whole expedition had, therefore, served no diplomatic, political or strategic purpose. Manila was occupied until handed back to the Spanish in April

1764 under the terms of the Peace of Paris. Nevertheless, the *Annual Register* for 1763 was convinced that:

This was the last of our conquests; and the nation, already in full enjoyment of the sweets of peace, had still the satisfaction to receive from the remotest parts of the globe, the news of victories which augment her honour and her riches.

The Directors of the East India Company would not have agreed, for as late as 1775 they were still chasing the British government for payment of the Company's net expenditure of £139,877 13s 6d for the expedition, and the only individuals who did well out of the capture of Manila were Cornish and Draper.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

‘A vast Empire, on which the sun never sets’

In the Treaty of Paris, France gave up all of Canada to Britain, including the disputed Ohio territory that had ignited the Anglo-French conflict in the first place. France secured important fishing rights off the Grand Banks and the Gulf of St Lawrence and the islands of St Pierre and Miquelon, though neither could be fortified. In the south Britain acquired Louisiana east of the Mississippi and the Gulf port of Mobile, though France retained New Orleans which would eventually come under Spanish rule. Britain swapped Cuba for Florida including the coastal territory all the way to the Mississippi.

In the Caribbean, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Marie-Galante were all restored to France who also acquired St Lucia. British control of Dominica, St Vincent, Grenada and Tobago was confirmed. The British were still allowed to cut logwood in Honduras, something which had vexed Madrid during the war and would continue to do so. In the East, Manila was handed back to Spain and Pondicherry to France. In Bengal the French were not allowed to build fortified positions but were allowed to continue trading. On the African coast Senegal was retained by Britain but Gorée given back to France.

In Europe, Hanover had been successfully defended and Hanoverian territory in French possession was handed over to George III. Minorca, the source of naval embarrassment in 1756, was handed back to Britain with Belle Isle returned to France. Spain was to evacuate any remaining troops from Portuguese soil. By any measure Britain had won the Anglo-French conflict and continued that success once Spain had entered the war.¹

In political and strategic terms, the object for British ministers was to balance aims in North America against Hanoverian security. But the European and North American theatres were part of the same whole for decisions made and events in each theatre had the capacity to influence the wider war. When Pitt stated that ‘America had been conquered in Germany’ he was only partly correct, for America was conquered by the Royal Navy’s ability to project power on a sustained basis in theatre while preventing France from doing the same. That strategy composed two operational deployments: the Western Squadron and naval forces operating out of Halifax. However, Pitt knew full well that the defence of Hanover was an integral part of the strategy. If France occupied the electorate, overseas gains would have to be traded. British money and troops were committed to Ferdinand’s army; the ability to fund this force and provide a subsidy to Prussia were based upon the Royal Navy’s ability to protect British trade while nearly bankrupting the French economy. Even then, without Ferdinand’s remarkable ability Britain would have had to give up more for peace in Europe. So Pitt’s true genius was seeing the war and British strategy as a whole – Europe and America could not be separated. The physical link was the Royal Navy.²

In order to have cash to pay for the Prussian subsidy and the ever-increasing costs of fighting in Germany it might appear that British grand strategy had to strike a careful balance between maritime and continental commitments. In essence, as Pitt knew all along, they were in fact the same, for British strength was dependent upon maritime commerce:

we must be Merchants while we are soldiers; that our Trade depends upon a proper Exertion of our Maritime Strength; that Trade and Maritime Force depend upon each other; and that the Riches, which are the true Resources of this Country, depend chiefly upon its Commerce.

This wider approach, or ‘system’, utilised the resources of a maritime empire to fight and win a global war.³

The war in America and the war in Germany were linked; the key was to ‘make the German war useful to the interests of this country as a subordinate measure, while our marine and colonies should be the principal object’. In order to prevent France throwing her full weight into

a maritime war she needed occupying in Europe, but that also raised the issue of Hanover. 'You must always', Pitt continued, 'cast out work for France upon the continent whenever you go to war with that country'. Frederick the Great and the British army in Hanover provided that work, but it was expensive. British military and naval expenditure had been £9,589,000 in 1756, peaked at £21,112,000 in 1761, before dropping back to £17,723,000 at the end of the war. In terms of British government spending during the war, 70 per cent went on the military, 22 per cent on interest payments and 8 per cent on civil expenditure. Fighting in Germany during the war had cost Britain at least £19,469,677, 1s, 6d.⁴

This level of expenditure was something neither Versailles or Madrid could match. It was based on the creditworthiness of the state and a flourishing financial services sector, which allowed for long-term confident borrowing. British revenues in 1755 totalled around £7 million, clearly not enough for fighting the war but crucial for servicing the interest payments on long-term government borrowing. Here the Bank of England provided security with annual long-term loans; those for 1756 were £8.5 million. To that must be added the HEIC, South Sea Company, Lloyds, as well as a number of Dutch and Jewish bankers and financiers. They all saw Britain as a safe investment based on the security of maritime trade provided by the Royal Navy. During the war, 1,855 British merchant ships were taken by enemy privateers, but annual losses never exceeded 2.5 per cent of all registered British shipping. In fact the British merchant fleet grew from 473,000 tons in 1755 to 496,000 in 1763.⁵

Its true value to Britain is perhaps highlighted by the experience of France. Versailles also relied on borrowing to finance war expenditure, but borrowed on shorter terms with higher interest rates. France looked for quick, decisive strokes (Minorca in 1756 or the invasion attempt in 1759) to bring Britain to the peace table. But stripped of her maritime trade and colonies she simply ran out of money and the state faced bankruptcy. Nowhere was that more evident than the financial dire straits Versailles found itself in following the loss of Quebec. The French inability to fight in Europe and North America doomed her to failure in both. Simply put, thanks to her superior credit rating based upon her maritime trade, protected by the Royal Navy, Britain could borrow more money over longer terms at a better rate of interest than France.⁶

Utilising a maritime empire to fight a war required naval forces to provide security. From 267 ships in commission in 1755 the Royal Navy increased to 379 in 1760. But between 1755 and 1757 the Royal Navy lost 17.2 per cent of its manpower every year, 5.9 per cent died, 8.8 per cent deserted and 2.8 were discharged. It is no surprise that during the early part of the war the navy had problems manning its increasing number of ships. During these years the Royal Navy was trying to obtain working command of the sea by cruises, blockades and battles. Here the Western Squadron really was the linchpin of British naval strategy; in 1757, 71 per cent of Royal Navy ships were serving in home waters. But it was the wider conditions set by the Western Squadron that allowed for power projection aimed at the main British object of the war: the conquest of Canada.

Finding suitable men for its warships was a recurring problem for the Royal Navy at the start of most conflicts in the age of sail, and perhaps the most important limiting factor in making strategic and operational deployments. Manning problems continued during 1756 and into 1757 with full mobilisation not achieved until 1758, and even then recruitment always lagged behind demand as it did during the entire war. Byng's problems were by no means unusual, but at the start of any war they were certainly more acute, especially when set against Admiralty prioritisation of the home defence. The number of British seamen employed in trade rose from 58,000 in the 1750s, with 17,000 in the navy, to 115,000 with 75,000 in the navy by 1759–60. Crucial to this was the Royal Navy's ability to recruit unskilled labour – landsmen – and teach them the ropes on the job to turn them into skilled seamen. So while the Royal Navy suffered problems in the early stages of the war, by 1759 the problems were largely solved. The Royal Navy's way of fighting was over the long term.⁷

Men need fuel and the ability to collect and then safely ship huge amounts of food and drink allowed the Royal Navy and the British army to project power on a global scale on a sustained basis. The proximity of North America to the Caribbean allowed supplies to be moved *within* the Empire, rather than shipping them out from the British Isles, and later in the war men would be drawn from the northern colonies for service in the Caribbean. This was something the French could simply not match;

they did from time to time obtain local superiority, but it was transitory. Their inability to mount a sustained presence was the main reason for their defeat in the Caribbean.⁸

Security at home after 1759 allowed British ministers to implement a colonial offensive. This had two strands. The first was overt and was about determining what type of victory Britain could achieve, the corollary to that was forcing France to accept she had lost the war and make peace. The second was less overt, and that was to deter Spain from entering the war. That policy failed in 1762 because Spain, fearing that her empire would come under attack anyway, took the opportunity to try and limit the influence of British seapower. Here Madrid made a grave miscalculation. Beset by problems between 1754 and 1757, where it seemed France might win the war, the Royal Navy mobilised, developed and learned in order to be the war-winning factor.⁹

Nowhere was the Royal Navy's learning curve more evident than in amphibious operations. For Pitt, the 'army and navy were the blade and hilt of one weapon'. The debacle at Rochefort led to an inquiry which set the tone for more cordial army-navy planning, training and leadership; it truly was the birth of the modern concept of jointery. There then followed a glorious record of success in amphibious operations which allowed the conquest of Canada and successful campaigns in the West and East Indies. Royal Navy officers also provided expertise on the inland waterways of North America, as forces were moved from Europe and America to Halifax by sea for the conquest of Louisbourg, Quebec and then Montreal. America also provided naval stores and transports. Later in the war troops were sent from North America to the Caribbean to assist with the conquest of Havana; the Caribbean also drew stores and victuals from North America. In the East the conquest of Manila was made using resources from India. All of this was only possible because the Royal Navy preserved British maritime communications while interdicting those of her enemies. That allowed Britain to project maritime power on a global scale. Even the operations of the British army in Europe were heavily influenced by maritime power: waterborne transport linked army operations to the North Sea ports and seaborne supplies.¹⁰

But even then, it took British troops and money in the form of His Britannic Majesty's Army in Germany and the genius of Ferdinand to

safeguard Hanover. The death of George II severed the direct link to Hanover, so the period 1754–63 saw a longer development with Britain looking a little less towards Europe. Britain was still interested in European issues in the Baltic for trade and naval stores, with regard to the Low Countries for security and in the Mediterranean for trade. In 1754 Britain had been a European power with large overseas interests. By 1763, with North America conquered and India and the West Indies relatively secure, Britain was very much an imperial power looking beyond Europe for its vital national interests.

There was a catch, however, as Pitt realised. Britain's main fears in 1763 related to France recovering her maritime and hence naval position and that had been helped by Britain 'restoring to her all the valuable West India islands, and by our concessions in the Newfoundland fisheries'. In essence, Pitt thought, 'we have given to her the means of recovering her prodigious losses and of becoming once more formidable to us at sea'. The opportunity for France to do that would come from one of the very successes of the war, the acquisition of a huge tract of land in North America. That profoundly changed the nature of the British Empire in North America and raised a number of issues over the cost of security, which would have long-term repercussions for the British Empire and the Royal Navy. For while in 1773 Sir George Macartney would write of 'this vast empire on which the sun never sets and whose bounds nature has not yet ascertained', a few months later American protesters were throwing East India Company tea into Boston harbour – accelerating a process which would rip apart the empire created a little over a decade earlier during the Seven Years War.¹¹

Notes

Introduction

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1. French fireships attack the Royal Navy fleet in the St Lawrence river, 1759 (NMM)



2. Quiberon Bay (NMRN)



3. The Capture of Havana, 1762: Storming of Morro Castle, 30 July (NMM)



4. The Captured Spanish Fleet at Havana, August-September 1762 (NMM)